



True Greatness

“Giving consistent effort in the little things in day-to-day life leads to true greatness.”

From the Life of Howard W. Hunter

President Howard W. Hunter taught that true greatness comes not from worldly success but from “thousands of little deeds . . . of service and sacrifice that constitute the giving, or losing, of one’s life for others and for the Lord.”¹ President Hunter lived his life according to this teaching. Rather than seeking the spotlight or the acclaim of others, he performed daily deeds of service and sacrifice that were often unnoticed.

One example of President Hunter’s relatively unnoticed service was the care he gave to his wife as she struggled with declining health for more than a decade. In the early 1970s, Claire Hunter began experiencing headaches and memory loss. She later suffered several small strokes, which made it difficult for her to talk or use her hands. When she began to need constant care, President Hunter provided as much as he could while also fulfilling his responsibilities as an Apostle. He arranged for someone to stay with Claire during the day, but he cared for her at night.

A cerebral hemorrhage in 1981 left Claire unable to walk or speak. Nevertheless, President Hunter sometimes helped her out of her wheelchair and held her tightly so they could dance as they had done years earlier.

After Claire experienced a second cerebral hemorrhage, doctors insisted that she be placed in a care center, and she remained there for the last 18 months of her life. During that time, President Hunter went to see her each day except when traveling on Church assignments. When he returned home, he went directly from the airport



Howard and Claire Hunter

to be with her. Most of the time she was either in a deep sleep or did not recognize him, but he continued to tell her of his love and to make sure that she was comfortable.

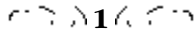
Elder James E. Faust of the Quorum of the Twelve later said that President Hunter’s “tender loving care of his wife Claire for more than ten years while she was not well was the most noble devotion of a man to a woman that many of us have seen in our lives.”²

After President Hunter died, a biography in the *Ensign* quoted his teachings about true greatness and summarized how they had guided his life:

“Though deep-seated modesty would prevent him from ever making the comparison, President Hunter met his own definition of greatness. His greatness emerged in periods of his life far from the spotlight as he made pivotal choices to work hard, to try again after failing, and to help his fellowman. Those attributes were reflected in his remarkable ability to succeed in endeavors as diverse as music, law, business, international relations, carpentry, and, above all, being a ‘good and faithful servant’ of the Lord [Matthew 25:21]. . . .

“For the fourteenth President of the Church, fulfilling the Lord’s purposes came as selflessly and naturally as had his labors as a schoolboy, a young father, a devoted bishop, and a tireless Apostle. The Lord’s vineyard, as Howard W. Hunter saw it, requires constant upkeep, and all that his Master required of him was to be a ‘good and faithful servant.’ This President Hunter fulfilled with true greatness, with constant attention to the example of the Savior, whom he served until the end.”³

Teachings of Howard W. Hunter



The world’s definition of greatness is often misleading and can prompt damaging comparisons.

Many Latter-day Saints are happy and enjoying the opportunities life offers. Yet I am concerned that some among us are unhappy. Some of us feel that 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. (See Heb. 11:13–16; D&C 45:11–14.)

Realizing who we are and what we may become assures us that with God nothing is really impossible. From the time we learn that Jesus wants us for a Sunbeam through the time 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 the definition of greatness.

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

We live in a world that seems to worship its own kind of greatness and to produce its own kind of heroes. A recent survey of young people ages eighteen through twenty-four revealed that today's youth prefer the "strong, go-it-alone, conquer-against-all-odds" individuals and that they clearly seek to pattern their lives after the glamorous and "boundlessly rich." During the 1950s, heroes included Winston Churchill, Albert Schweitzer, President Harry Truman, Queen Elizabeth, and Helen Keller—the blind and deaf writer-lecturer. These were figures who either helped shape history or were noted for their inspiring lives. Today, many of the top ten heroes are movie stars and other entertainers, which suggests something of a shift in our attitudes. (See *U.S. News & World Report*, 22 Apr. 1985, pp. 44–48.)

It's true that 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 and to 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.



“True greatness [comes from] 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.”

Because we are being constantly exposed to the world’s definition of *greatness*, it is understandable that we make 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 to improve our lives, 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 dwell on our failures while ignoring aspects of our lives that may contain elements of true greatness.⁴

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Giving consistent effort in the little things in day-to-day life leads to true greatness.

In 1905, President Joseph F. Smith made this most profound statement about true greatness:

“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: 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 a good roommate or a good neighbor.

. . . 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 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.⁵



The Prophet Joseph was concerned with the daily tasks of service and caring for others.

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

“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



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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.” (In George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet*, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1986, p. 344.)

On another occasion, when Governor Carlin of Illinois sent Sheriff Thomas King of Adams County and several others as a posse to apprehend the Prophet and deliver him to the 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. (Ibid., p. 372.) Small, kind, and yet significant acts of service were not occasional for the Prophet.

Writing about the opening of the [Prophet Joseph Smith's] store in Nauvoo, Elder George Q. Cannon recorded:

“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.” (Ibid., p. 385.)

And in a letter, the Prophet wrote:

“The [Red Brick Store in Nauvoo] 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.” (Ibid., p. 386.)

About this scene, George Q. Cannon commented:

“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. . . . 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.’” (Ibid., p. 386.)⁶

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True greatness comes from persevering in the difficulties of life and from serving in ways that are often unnoticed.

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 failure—and

to continue to endure and to persevere in the ongoing difficulties of life when those struggles and tasks contribute to others' progress and happiness and one's own eternal salvation—this is true greatness.

We all want to achieve a measure of greatness in this life. Many have already achieved great things; others are striving to achieve greatness. Let me encourage you to achieve and, at the same time, 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. 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. 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, stays with and cares for a sick child while her husband is at work or in school. I am including those who volunteer to give blood or to work with the elderly. I am thinking about those of you who faithfully fulfill your priesthood and church responsibilities and of the students who write home regularly to thank their parents for their love and support.

I am also talking about those who instill in others faith and a desire to live the gospel—those 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 tasks, 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 that provide culture and order and excitement in 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." (Matt. 23:11.)⁷

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True greatness requires consistent, small, and sometimes ordinary steps over a long period of time.

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. 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. Greatness requires the development of character. It requires a multitude of correct decisions in 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.⁸

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Commonplace tasks often have the greatest positive effect on others.

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 each different and unique; 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 with which to contend. 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 we perform that have the greatest positive effect on the lives of others, as compared with the things that the world so often relates to greatness.⁹

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**Doing the things that God has ordained to be
important will lead to true greatness.**

It appears to me that the kind of greatness that 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 one day 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 and 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 Cor. 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.

May we never be discouraged in doing those daily tasks which God has ordained to be "the common lot of man."¹⁰

Suggestions for Study and Teaching

Questions

- Why are we sometimes confused about what true greatness is? (See section 1.) Why does the world's definition of greatness lead some people to feel unfulfilled and unhappy?
- How does President Hunter's definition of true greatness differ from the world's definition? (See section 2.) How can this definition of true greatness help you in your life? Contemplate some specific "little things" that would be good to give more time and attention to.
- What impresses you about Joseph Smith's small acts of service, as outlined in section 3? What are some small acts of service that have blessed you?
- Review the examples in section 4 of what constitutes true greatness. How have you seen people manifest true greatness in these ways?
- What can we learn from the teachings in section 5 about how to achieve true greatness?
- What are some examples you have seen of "commonplace tasks we perform [having] the greatest positive effect on the lives of others"? (See section 6.)
- Ponder President Hunter's teachings in section 7. How do service and sacrifice lead to true greatness? How does being "valiant in the testimony of Jesus" help us achieve true greatness?

Related Scriptures

1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Timothy 4:12; Mosiah 2:17; Alma 17:24–25; 37:6; Moroni 10:32; D&C 12:8; 59:23; 76:5–6; 88:125

Teaching Help

“As you prayerfully prepare to teach you may be led to emphasize certain principles. You may gain an understanding of how best to present certain ideas. You may discover examples, object lessons, and inspiring stories in the simple activities of life. You may feel impressed to invite a particular person to assist with the lesson. You may be reminded of a personal experience that you can share” (*Teaching, No Greater Call* [1999], 48).

Notes

1. “What Is True Greatness?” *Ensign*, Sept. 1987, 71.
2. James E. Faust, “Howard W. Hunter: Man of God,” *Ensign*, Apr. 1995, 28.
3. “President Howard W. Hunter: The Lord’s ‘Good and Faithful Servant,’” *Ensign*, Apr. 1995, 9, 16.
4. “What Is True Greatness?” 70.
5. “What Is True Greatness?” 70–71.
6. “What Is True Greatness?” 71.
7. “What Is True Greatness?” 71–72.
8. “What Is True Greatness?” 72.
9. “What Is True Greatness?” 72.
10. “What Is True Greatness?” 72.