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THE GOSPEL AND THE Good Life

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family and the gospel of Jesus Christ are the essentials.*

Many talks stress the pursuit of dreams and passions. I acknowledge those goals, but I desire to have you contemplate a greater purpose in your life.

Gratitude for Blessings

To begin, I hope you will be grateful for your blessings—especially your heritage. Gratitude and humility are closely intertwined. We live in a self-centered age. Social media, in particular, can easily be used for self-promotion. It has never been more important to be grateful and humble. Those who possess these attributes express appreciation for their blessings as they follow the Savior's example.

My friend Harvard professor Roger B. Porter, who is a faithful member of the Church, noted at one of the commencement proceedings at Harvard in May 2015 that gratitude “requires that we acknowledge our debt to others,” and “it often involves a humble response for unearned or unmerited gifts.” He concluded: “If you choose to embrace gratitude as a central element of your life, it will serve you well. It will help you resist the temptation to succumb to pride and to fall into a sense of entitlement. It will help you to see the good and to acknowledge the positive. It will help you to put in context the bumps in the road and the adversity you will from time to time encounter. It will help you focus attention on those less fortunate than you whose lives you can bless.”¹



An old Chinese proverb reads, "When you drink the water, don't forget the well from whence it came."

I would suggest that we need to be especially grateful for our heritage. When we are blessed with goodly parents, we should be grateful. This is the debt each of us owes for our heritage. An old Chinese proverb reads, "When you drink the water, don't forget the well from whence it came."

It is clear from the scriptures that we are to honor our parents. Proverbs reads, "My son, keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother" (Proverbs 6:20). Ephesians teaches us to "honour thy father and mother" (see Ephesians 6:2–3; see also Exodus 20:12). The great German philosopher Goethe put it this way: "What from your fathers' heritage is lent, earn it anew, to really possess it!"² It is clear that we need to be grateful for our parents and take positive action to acquire that which they would hope to bestow upon us.

Eternal Principles vs. Worldly Philosophies

In addition to encouraging you to have gratitude, I wish to share some practical advice that may help you to be both happy and successful in achieving a meaningful life, which is often referred to as "the good life."

In a recent essay, Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, articulated the concern I have about the diminished role of faith, moral values, and meaning in modern life. He stated:

"If there is one thing the great institutions of the modern world do not do, it is to provide meaning. . . .

"Science, technology, the free market and the . . . democratic state have enabled us to reach unprecedented achievements in knowledge, freedom, life expectancy and affluence. They are among the greatest achievements of human civilization and are to be defended and cherished.

"But they do not answer the three questions that every reflective individual will ask at some time in his or her life: Who am I?

Why am I here? How then shall I live? The result is that the 21st century has left us with a maximum of choice and a minimum of meaning.”³

This quote expresses in an elegant fashion the essence of my message. I am deeply concerned that the good life based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ is now secondary to a worldly view of the good life.

For those of us who are members of the Church, the gospel of Jesus Christ and His Resurrection and Atonement are the foundation for all that is essential, and they also bring meaning to this life. The Savior has inspired beliefs and established standards of conduct as to what is moral, righteous, and desirable and that results in the good life. However, the principles and basic morality the Savior taught are under serious attack in today’s world. Christianity itself is under attack.

This is not new. The recipe for the good life has been debated for centuries. When the Apostle Paul was in Athens, he encountered “philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks” (Acts 17:18). The Stoics believed that the highest good was virtue, and the Epicureans believed the highest good was pleasure. Many Stoics had become proud and used their philosophy as “a cloak for . . . ambition and iniquity.” Many Epicureans had become hedonists who took as their motto, “Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.”⁴ Many in the academic world have long pointed to Aristotle’s advocacy of intellectual contemplation as a blueprint for the good life. It is interesting that many of these same worldly philosophies that conflicted with early Christianity are still present in slightly different forms today.

In addition, many new philosophies conflict directly with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This has happened quickly. Using Book of Mormon language, “in the space of not many years” (Helaman 7:6), much of the world now calls “evil good, and good evil” (2 Nephi 15:20). In fact, these two scriptural phrases reflect what is happening in our day. What is considered moral has swiftly changed. There has been an incredible movement away from moral conduct as the basis

of the good life. Some diminish Christianity by accepting the myth that in Christianity, happiness is not about this life but only about heaven.⁵ I assure you that following the Savior brings happiness in this life *and* in heaven.

Eulogy Virtues vs. Résumé Virtues

Some challenges are not just about good and evil. Some require us to make choices based on what is best, not just what is good.⁶

David Brooks, in an editorial titled “The Moral Bucket List,” developed the concept that there are “two sets of virtues, the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace. The eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral.”⁷ Brooks correctly concluded that the eulogy virtues are much more important. This hit home for me personally because I had an experience when I was in my



mid-20s that had a profound impact on me. It involved the funerals of two good men that took place only a few days apart. The account is true, but I have changed the names and have purposely been vague about a few of the facts.

I was 25 years old, had graduated from Stanford Law School, and had just started employment with a law firm. I spent my workday world with highly educated people who had amassed significant material possessions. They were kind and on the whole gracious and attractive people.

The Church members I associated with were much more diverse. Most of them had little material wealth. They were wonderful people, and most had meaning in their lives. It was at this juncture that two older, retired men I had known for many years passed away. Their funerals were held only a few days apart, and I traveled to both funerals. I have decided to call one of the men Rich and the other man Faithful. Those two funerals are cemented in my mind



because they clarified the significance of the choices all people have before them, especially the young. They also demonstrate the complexity of the distinction between the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues.

Both Rich and Faithful served missions as young men. By all accounts, they were both dedicated missionaries. After they attended college, their lives began to diverge. Rich married a beautiful woman who over time became less active in the Church. Faithful married an equally beautiful woman who was completely active in the Church. More than any other factor, this decision framed the remaining decisions of their lives. In my experience, when couples remain true and faithful to the Savior and the eternal significance of the family, the eulogy virtues are almost always preserved.

I will now share more about Rich. He had wonderful people skills and cared a great deal about people. He began employment with a major U.S. corporation and ultimately became president of that company. He had a large income and lived in a large, beautiful home set on spacious grounds. That is why I have decided to call him Rich. It would be fair to say that his career choices were not just good or better but were the best.

His family and Church choices, however, were not so good. He was a good man and did not engage in personal choices that were in and of themselves evil, but his family choices and influence on his children focused almost exclusively on education and employment, essentially the résumé virtues that are so valued in the marketplace. His sons also embarked on excellent careers. They did not, however, remain active in the Church, and they married young women who were not members. I am not aware of all the facts about his sons, but in each case these marriages ended in divorce.

Rich and his wife also became less active. They were primarily involved in high-profile social and community activities. He always considered himself LDS and was proud of his mission, but he did not attend church. He would, from time to time, contribute to Church building



projects and assist LDS members in their careers. Furthermore, he was an influence for honesty, integrity, and goodwill in all the positions he held.

His funeral was held at a nondenominational chapel at the cemetery. Many top executives and dignitaries attended the funeral, including the governor of the state where he lived. Except for his children, grandchildren, and me, everyone attending was over the age of 50. It was, on the whole, a somber funeral. Basic principles of the plan of happiness were not taught, and little was said of Jesus Christ. Rich's life was based almost exclusively on résumé virtues.

Faithful's employment decisions were far less successful. His initial effort at a small independent business was thwarted when the business burned and he lost everything. He subsequently created a small business but could barely make his required payments. He had a small but adequate home. He enjoyed

his work and his interaction with people. His career was good and certainly satisfactory but not distinguished or what might be called best. It was not a résumé-virtues career.

His family and Church choices, on the other hand, were absolutely the best. He and his wife were completely active in the Church. He served as called, often as a teacher, attended the temple frequently, and was a faithful priesthood holder. He had wonderful relationships, especially with his large family and his many grandchildren. They were all well educated, but his main emphasis to them was on living a Christlike life. In his retirement, he and his wife served a mission together. Though he faced trials, including the death of a son in World War II, he achieved satisfaction and joy throughout his life because of the purpose and meaning provided by his family and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

His funeral in the ward meetinghouse was large and joyful. People of all ages attended,

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including large numbers of grandchildren and young people he had served. The plan of happiness was taught, and the Savior was at the center of the service. It was an exemplary Latter-day Saint funeral. The talks were about his character, kindness, concern for others, and faith in and love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Choices and the Good Life

I have indicated that these two funerals came at a defining time for me. I had served a mission, and I loved the Church. I was just starting my career and was becoming impressed with those having material and occupational success. I realized that the choices I was making would define my happiness in this life and determine the legacy I would leave. I also realized the eternal significance of the choices that were before me. It was clear to me that choices have eternal significance. What was

most important to me about the lives I just described is that I realized that the most significant choices can be made by everyone, regardless of their talents, abilities, opportunities, or economic circumstances. I realized that for me, my future children, and everyone I would have the opportunity to influence, putting the Savior, my family, and the Church first was essential. Doing so would result in the good life.

In the worst of circumstances, when everything else crumbles, family and the gospel of Jesus Christ are the essentials. Think of Father Lehi in the Book of Mormon, where it describes how he “departed into the wilderness. And he left his house, and the land of his inheritance, and his gold, and his silver, and his precious things, and took nothing with him, save it were his family” (1 Nephi 2:4).

This generation has the challenge of protecting faith and family. One researcher

has looked back as far as ancient India and Greece and concluded that every nonreligious population in history has experienced demographic decline.⁸ The news media recently highlighted the declining birthrate in much of the world today. The *Wall Street Journal* proclaimed in a front page article, “The World’s New Population Time Bomb: Too Few People.” The article stated that in 2016, “for the first time since 1950, . . . combined working-age population will decline.”⁹

Lack of faith and population decline are clearly inter-related. The Father’s eternal plan for His children depends upon both faith and families. I am grateful that Latter-day Saints, in survey after survey, are maintaining faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and are continuing to marry and have children.

Some may not have the opportunity to marry or have children. But individuals who righteously follow the Savior and His commandments—and who provide selfless service to our Father’s children—“will receive all promised blessings in the eternities.”¹⁰

As we face the difficulties and trials of life, many events occur over which we have little or no control. But on matters of principle, conduct, religious observance, and righteous living, we are in control. Our faith in and worship of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, is a choice that we make.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, quoting William Law, an 18th-century English clergyman, stated this in a most succinct fashion: “If you have not chosen the kingdom of God first, it will in the end make no difference what you have chosen instead.”¹¹

Please understand that in reciting the true account of the men I called Rich and Faithful, I am not advocating for less interest in goals relating to education or occupation. Quite the contrary, we should do everything we can to advance our accomplishments in these two areas. What I am saying is that when goals relating to education and occupation are elevated to a position superior to the family and the Church and a testimony of the Savior, the unintended

consequences of overemphasizing the résumé virtues can be significantly adverse.

I am confident that you can attain the joy and happiness you desire and that God wants for you if you are:

- Grateful for your blessings—especially your heritage.
- Committed to the eternal principles that will bring meaning to your life.
- Determined that your eulogy virtues prevail over your résumé virtues.
- Prepared to report to the Savior that you have lived a good life.

The most important meeting each of us will have on the other side of the veil is with the Savior, “the keeper of the gate” (2 Nephi 9:41). Regardless of who our ancestors are and whether we are rich or poor, we will report on our adherence to the commandments we have been given. We should live so we can “enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name” (Psalm 100:4).

We will want to joyfully report that we have lived a truly good life. ■

From a devotional address, “The Good Life,” given at Brigham Young University–Idaho on December 18, 2015. For the full address, visit web.byui.edu/devotionalsandspeeches.

NOTES

1. Roger B. Porter, commencement address, Dunster House, Harvard University, May 28, 2015.
2. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Bayard Taylor (1912), 1:28.
3. Jonathan Sacks, “How to Defeat Religious Violence,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 2, 2015, C2; see also Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (2015), 13.
4. See Frederic W. Farrar, *The Life and Work of St. Paul* (1895), 304.
5. See Carl Cederstrom, “The Dangers of Happiness,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2015, 8.
6. See Dallin H. Oaks, “Good, Better, Best,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 104–8.
7. David Brooks, “Moral Bucket List,” *New York Times*, Apr. 11, 2015, SR1, nytimes.com; see also David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (2015), xi.
8. See Michael Blume, in David Brooks, “Finding Peace within the Holy Texts,” *New York Times*, Nov. 17, 2015, A23, nytimes.com.
9. Greg Ip, “The World’s New Population Time Bomb: Too Few People,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 24, 2015, 1.
10. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (2010), 1.3.3.
11. Neal A. Maxwell, “Response to a Call,” *Ensign*, May 1974, 112; see also William Law, in *The Quotable Lewis*, ed. Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root (1989), 172.