

Preparing the Greatest Generation of Missionaries: A Mission for Every Woman

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On this beautiful day I am grateful to be with you, my wonderful Relief Society sisters, in places near and far away. It would be a glorious thing if I could greet each of you personally. We could visit together and you could share your thoughts, feelings, and experiences with me—teaching me all you know about how to prepare sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, neighbors and friends, and grandchildren to be covenant men and women who are “fully prepared to serve the Lord.”¹ Although I don't have the pleasure of talking with each one of you individually, I will share insightful ideas gleaned from sisters around the world that I hope you will discuss with each other in your families, neighborhoods, and wards wherever you live.

The courageous examples of the righteous women in the scriptures have always been a great inspiration to me. I have thought often of Hannah, the faithful wife of Elkanah. Unable to bear children, Hannah was a “woman of a sorrowful spirit” who “poured out [her] soul before the Lord” in the temple, pleading for a son (1 Samuel 1:15).

“The Lord remembered her” and blessed Hannah with a son (1 Samuel 1:19). While Samuel was yet a small boy, she returned to the temple and told Eli the priest, “I am the woman that stood . . . here, praying unto the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:26).

“For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him: therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:27–28).

We don’t know exactly how Hannah prepared young Samuel for his life’s mission. We can imagine that Hannah felt great joy as “the child Samuel grew on, and was in favour both with the Lord, and also with men” (1 Samuel 2:26). What we do know is how Hannah responded when she left Samuel with Eli the priest: “And Hannah prayed, and said, My heart rejoiceth in the Lord. . . . There is none holy as the Lord: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God” (1 Samuel 2:1–2).

Sisters, the Lord has asked us to give Him the world’s “greatest generation of missionaries”²—young men and women who meet a higher standard of faith in and commitment to His gospel. We have a sacred charge as mothers, grandmothers, aunts, neighbors, and ward members. Like Hannah, let us rejoice in this opportunity, and let us reach for a higher standard for ourselves.

I would like to share three foundational principles that can help prepare our young men and young women “to rise up, to measure up, and to be fully prepared to serve the Lord”³ not only for eighteen months or two years but for their lifelong missions in mortality.

First, be meticulously obedient and faithful.

Second, be committed to the principles of hard work and sacrifice.

Third, be covenant makers and covenant keepers.

“Be Meticulously Obedient and Faithful”

In his October 2002 conference address, Elder M. Russell Ballard asked us to teach our children to be “meticulously obedient and faithful.”⁴ He said, “Do the simple things.”⁵ One sister shared how she and her husband rear their seven children. “We follow this formula,” she said. “We have daily family prayer and scripture study. We faithfully hold weekly family home evenings. These regular practices have been the formula for keeping our family together and on track.”

The simple things, practiced daily in our families, can bring to pass much righteousness. As Alma reminds us, “By small and simple things are great thing brought to pass” (Alma 37:6). It is in our homes where we teach children to be disciples of Jesus Christ through simple things such as regular personal and family scripture study, individual and family prayer, opportunities

for service to others, and experiences in keeping the Lord's commandments. It is often in seeing that these practices occur daily that a mother's mettle is tested.

Let me use the principles of modesty in dress and speech as an example. *For the Strength of Youth* sets a high standard for our youth, standards that we adults must also adhere to with precision. I heard recently of a sister who felt great satisfaction in reaching her goal to lose weight and become more physically fit. As she improved her physique, she also changed her wardrobe, buying clothing that showed off her newly toned body. As a Young Women advisor, she wore one of her new outfits to a joint youth activity. One of the Beehive girls said to her, "Sister Jones, if I get muscles in my arms like yours, do you think my mom will let *me* wear a top that *tight*?" That honest question caused Sister Jones to rethink her wardrobe choices.⁶

Contrast the interaction between this Beehive girl and her advisor with that of a new convert and a sister missionary in another part of the world. A faithful Nigerian mother observed the modest dress of an older sister serving as a missionary in her country. She noticed that the sister missionary always wore longer skirts and short-sleeved blouses as she served in this hot, humid region of equatorial West Africa. The Nigerian sister, a convert now serving as a Young Women president, had left behind a worldly lifestyle when she joined the Church. Now, as she quietly and carefully observed the dress and demeanor of the senior missionary sister, she taught her own two daughters this same standard of behavior and modesty in dress.⁷

Without ever realizing it, the sister missionary had become an influence for good in the lives of these newer members of the Church. It had not been her intent to be a role model for this African sister and her daughters, any more than it was for Sister Jones to be an example for her Beehive girl. The reality is that we are *all* role models for our daughters and sons, for the young women and young men we interact with, and for each other.

As covenant women, we are blessed to know who we are and *whose* we are. We know the sanctity of our bodies. To be meticulously faithful in dressing modestly is not to live out some arbitrary guideline. It is rather a way that we "reverence womanhood"⁸ and let our light shine forth.

Our dress in a very real way shows our understanding that our responsibilities and our covenants are directly connected to Jesus Christ and His work upon the earth. Sisters, this point is so important that I hope you will allow me to make it again. When we teach young women to be modest, when we say we value modesty, when we proclaim that we are covenant daughters of

God, we *must* be meticulous in living out these doctrines, or our daughters will surely be confused.

This is a conversation that was recently overheard in a department store as a teenage girl was shopping with her mother for a swimming suit. As the young woman pointed out bikinis she would like to try on, her mother said, “That bikini is cute, but I won’t buy it for you.” The frustrated teenager asked, “How can you say it’s cute and then say you won’t buy it for me?” Five minutes later the daughter was in the dressing room trying on the bikinis. As she tried on one bikini after another, her mother said, “Your father is going to be furious with me!”

Just as Satan strives to entice mothers and daughters into following the world’s standards of dress and behavior, he also seeks to ensnare young men. Internet pornography, violent video games, hard rock music, and other media practices are tools the adversary uses to dull spirits and lead many into a life of worldliness rather than missionary service.

Such was the case with a young man who was first introduced to Internet pornography as a result of innocent curiosity. He became hooked on pornography, which triggered feelings of guilt and depression. He said, “I kept going to church so I wouldn’t upset my parents. But I knew the lifestyle I was caught up in was wrong. I noticed a change in my own countenance. . . . I became calloused and hardened. I found myself lying to my parents, my bishop, everyone around me. Inside I was going through personal turmoil and spiritual torment.” The young man continues, “I humbly bowed before the Lord in tears and pled for strength beyond my own. Night after night I prayed, and finally I knew I had to talk to my bishop.” He approached his bishop and began a long and difficult repentance process and eventually was found worthy to serve a mission.⁹

Sisters, a very important part of *our* mission is to teach our young men to be “modern-day Josephs who flee from evil.” In other words, when exposed to pornography or other destructive influences, they “leave immediately—whether by a mouse click, a channel change, or a quick exit from a friend’s house.”¹⁰ It’s being “meticulously obedient and faithful” in the simple things like prayer and scripture study that our youth will be fortified against the evils and unrighteous influences of the world and have the courage to resist temptation and be obedient and faithful.

Be Committed to the Principles of Hard Work and Sacrifice

A second foundational principle that will help young men and women “rise up, measure up, and be fully prepared” to serve the Lord is “be committed to the principles of hard work and sacrifice.”

Discipleship requires hard work, self-discipline, and sacrifice. We model these principles as we teach them to our children. Missionary service was a frequent topic in one home where the distinction between a *sacrifice* and a *blessing* was clarified. Missions were anticipated as a special blessing from the Lord with opportunities for growth and service that would require careful preparation. These parents wanted their children to want to serve.

The mother shared that for about thirteen years her three sons, assisted by their father, had four morning newspaper routes. She said, “These routes were our city boys’ cows. In other words, each morning instead of milking cows, they delivered 220 newspapers. It was time spent working *together* daily. As parents, we felt the discipline of early rising along with the responsibility of completing a task would help our sons throughout their lives. The money earned was the boys’ missionary funds. They deposited the money and watched the balances grow as they calculated the amount needed for missionary service.”

She continued, “We wanted our children to be obedient and faithful missionaries. We tried to prepare them spiritually, physically, emotionally, and financially. They were not sent alone but were led; we didn’t ask them to do anything that we wouldn’t do ourselves.” These habits of hard work and discipline not only helped three sons and a daughter to *go* on missions but also helped one son to *stay* on his mission when adversity almost overwhelmed him. Because of a unique language in the mission, this missionary found himself assigned for most of his time to one companion—a difficult, disobedient elder. For months the faithful missionary struggled and worked and prayed and counseled with his leaders. The situation did not improve. His mother believes that his stability during this trying time resulted from his compelling desire to serve and succeed—lessons he had learned at home.¹¹

Ten years later, reflecting on that difficult time in his mission, this valiant, returned missionary and new father recounts how he named his son “Matthew” to remind him of the strength he found in this New Testament book. He said, “If I could have named my son Matthew 5–7, I would have. But there are certain things parents should not do in naming a child—for the sake of that child. So my son is just named Matthew, for short. Matt, for shorter.”

“I wanted to name him out of respect for the Sermon on the Mount, because that sermon means a lot to me. It first became my favorite passage of scripture when I was on my mission. I was going through a particularly challenging time when I felt I was trying as hard as I could but was still unhappy. I had been taught by my parents to ‘feast upon the words of Christ, for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do’” (2 Nephi 32:3).

As this young father continued reflecting on his mission, he said, “I put the words of Christ to the test every day and each time the words told me what I should do.” Those words and teachings in Matthew 5–7 along with the strength of his parents’ teachings carried this missionary through the most difficult times of his mission.¹² Commitment to the principles of hard work and sacrifice will become a great blessing in the lives of all young men and young women as they prepare for missionary service.

“Be Covenant Makers and Covenant Keepers”

The third foundational principle that can help young men and women “rise up . . . measure up . . . and be fully prepared to serve the Lord” is to teach them “to be covenant makers and covenant keepers,”¹³ as Elder Ballard counseled.

How can we teach our children to be “covenant makers and covenant keepers”? What does this mean to us as mothers? As we get on our knees and pray to the Lord, I testify that He will teach, guide, and direct us. The Spirit prompts the prepared. Our poignant prayers can be like those of Alma: “O Lord . . . grant unto us that we may have success in bringing them again unto thee in Christ . . . give unto us . . . power and wisdom . . . Behold, O Lord, their souls are precious” (Alma 31:34–35).

Power and wisdom are what we need as we teach our children early about the covenants they make at baptism. We can discuss with them, pray with them, and foster understanding of the Savior and His mission. Our privilege and covenantal responsibility is to stand as His witnesses in the world. Again, it is the simple, consistent practices that lay the strong foundation. Testimony and beliefs shared with your children will help them establish a pattern of their own belief and testimony, as they did with a young man named Taku.

In Japan, where less than 1 percent of the population claims to be Christian, Sunday is a day that most people work and students are expected to participate in school activities. To do otherwise brings severe discrimination and heckling.

During the critical third year of middle school, most students attend a cram school after regular school. They study late into the evenings each day and fill their Sundays with studies and after school activities—all in preparation for the exams at the end of the year, which determine the high school and college each student will attend.

Taku, a third-year middle-school student in Saga City on the island of Kyushu, was faced with a dilemma in keeping the Sabbath day holy, as his parents had taught him from his earliest years. He knew he was at a critical crossroads in his life. At a district conference just after the school year started, he was reminded again in a talk by the mission president about the importance of observing the Sabbath and the promised blessings for doing so. Taku resolved to do the simple things he had been taught in his home—including honoring the Sabbath day. All year he remained true to his goal. He did not study on Sunday or participate in school activities.

Finally, the time for the dreaded tests came. Taku's parents felt that God's help would definitely be needed. The night before the tests, his father gave him a blessing in which he was impressed to tell his son that if he showed faith, he would pass the test.

The scores came out. The Lord had indeed blessed Taku. He was one of the few who obtained entrance into the school he desired. Taku knew the Lord had blessed him beyond his normal abilities.

But this was not the end of this young man's test of faith. Upon admission to the prestigious high school, Taku found that many tests were administered on Sunday. His faith did not waiver. He went directly to his instructor and said, "As a Christian, I believe Sunday is a holy day. I do not study on Sunday, and I cannot take the exams on Sunday." To his surprise and the disbelief of almost everyone else, his teacher praised Taku for his integrity to his beliefs and offered to allow him to take the tests on Saturday.¹⁴

By committing to keep the Sabbath day holy, Taku learned that even in a non-Christian society that often discriminates against Church believers, the Lord keeps His promises to those who are covenant makers and covenant keepers.

You and I know that we don't always receive tangible rewards for keeping the commandments and honoring our covenants. The Lord teaches each of us life's lessons in different ways. Our son Clark was a competitive high school swimmer and co-captain of a top-ranked varsity team with a long tradition of winning the state title. For many years, Clark spent six days a week training. During the week he would arise at 4:30 A.M. to swim for an hour and a

half before school and again for several hours after school. Early in his life, our son made a decision never to practice or compete on Sunday. His coach knew of that decision and ridiculed him, saying, “Clark, you’ll *never* be a champion!” By the world’s standards, he never was. As a senior, he did not place first in the state in his grueling 500-meter freestyle event. But in his dad’s heart and mine, he was a *true* champion. Clark honored the Lord’s Sabbath day and put God first in his life. He lived a life of integrity, and that’s what pleases the Lord.

We know as mothers that the results of all our daily teachings—all we do regularly to help prepare our children—may come together in a moment that defines a life. Think of Enos, for instance. He wrote, “I went to hunt beasts in the forests; and the words which I had often heard my father speak concerning eternal life, and the joy of the saints, sunk deep into my heart” (Enos 1:3). As Enos was “struggling in the spirit” for many hours and pouring out his soul to the Lord for forgiveness, his faith in Christ, planted and nurtured in his soul years earlier by his father, brought about this life-changing moment, which led to the remission of his sins (Enos 1:1–10).

Defining moments don’t just come to the rebellious. Thom, a seventeen-year-old member of the Church in a predominantly Jewish high school in the eastern United States, was nominated for the title of “Mr. Quince Orchard,” the equivalent of homecoming king. Part of the competition for this annual male popularity contest was an interview with the contestants before a school assembly made up of thousands of people from the student body and community. Each young man was asked to respond to a question in which he was invited to identify a person in history, living or dead, whom he admired. In a follow-up response, each young man was also asked to share a question he would want to ask the person he had identified. Thom, an outgoing young man usually not at a loss for words, could think of nothing to say when he was asked to respond to the judge’s question.

“Then suddenly,” he said, “it was as if someone put something into my mind, and I knew what to say. Without thinking or caring about the consequences of my response,” Thom said, “my mind caught hold upon Jesus, and I boldly began bearing my testimony of Jesus Christ. It was as though all the things that I had ever learned from my parents, seminary teachers, and Church leaders came together in this one defining moment when I understood clearly the power of the Atonement in my life.” After bearing his witness of Jesus Christ, Thom said to the large audience assembled, “I would ask Jesus this question: ‘Lord, how did you have so much love for

each of us that you would take upon yourself my sins and the sins of all mankind?”

The large auditorium went totally silent, and people sat stunned as Thom finished his response. When the curtain closed on the stage where he was standing, a teacher rushed up to Thom and said, “I can’t believe you did this.” Thom was a covenant maker and a covenant keeper as he boldly testified of Jesus Christ before five thousand nonbelievers. Two years later as a powerful, “spiritually energized”¹⁵ missionary in the Ukraine Kiev Mission, he continued keeping his covenant to “stand as a witness of God at all times and in all things and in all places” (Mosiah 18:9).

Like Hannah did as she watched her son Samuel grow in spiritual strength and preparation for his life’s mission, we rejoice when young women and young men like Thom “rise up, measure up and become fully prepared” to serve the Lord as his “greatest generation of missionaries.”

Preparing this generation for *their* missions is part of *our* mission. Whether or not we have children of our own, it is our privilege to teach them to—

Be meticulously obedient and faithful.

Be committed to the principles of hard work and sacrifice.

Be covenant makers and covenant keepers.

I testify that we are given increased capacity and blessings, so we as women can rise to a higher standard, to the Lord’s standard, as we commit to teach sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, and grandchildren to do the same. This comforting knowledge, that the Lord is ever with us as we seek Him, gives us spiritual confidence and noble purpose as mothers.

Sisters, as we offer to the Lord the “greatest generation of missionaries,” let us rejoice. For we *know* that “there is none holy as the Lord: neither is there any rock like our God” (1 Samuel 2:2). This is my testimony and my joy.

Notes

¹ M. Russell Ballard, “The Greatest Generation of Missionaries,” *Ensign*, November 2002, 47.

² Ballard, "Greatest Generation," 47.

³ Ballard, "Greatest Generation," 47.

⁴ Ballard, "Greatest Generation," 47.

⁵ M. Russell Ballard, Worldwide Leadership Training Broadcast, 11 January 2003.

⁶ Personal knowledge of author.

⁷ Letter in possession of author.

⁸ Susan Bednar, BYU-Idaho Six-Stake Fireside, Rexburg, Idaho, 16 September 2001.

⁹ "Danger Ahead! Avoiding Pornography's Trap," *New Era*, October 2002, 34.

¹⁰ "Danger Ahead!" 34.

¹¹ Letter in possession of author.

¹² Letter in possession of author.

¹³ Ballard, "Greatest Generation," 47.

¹⁴ Letter in possession of author.

¹⁵ Ballard, "Greatest Generation," 47.