

Search Diligently in the Light of Christ

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I appreciate the prayers of so many of my family members and friends on my behalf for this assignment to open this year's women's conference. I am grateful to the Lord for his inspiration which has attended me. I know of the great preparation each of you brings to this conference, and I pray that our individual preparations will meet and be blessed by the Spirit, that each of us may receive what we need.

When I was growing up, I read and studied in a variety of places in our home. It didn't matter where I was—in the front room, at the kitchen table, or in my bed—my mother would always find me and say, "Would you like a little more light on the subject?" Actually, I wanted a lot more light on the subject. I needed increased illumination—of the pages, of my mind, and of the topic.

She would then proceed to turn on a light. And her consistent interest and comforting presence would tell me that even the seemingly impossible task before me was indeed possible, that with continuing effort on my part and the increased light she had provided, I would succeed.

Do you need more light on a subject? Could you use a little increased illumination of your mind? A little more light in your life?

And what kind of light would help you the most these days?

A healing light,
A comforting light,
A calming light?

Or would you prefer:

A clarifying light,
A revealing light,

A hope-filled light?

Or is the help you need to be found in:

A beckoning light,
An invigorating light,
An inspiring light?

How about:

A heart-changing light,
A mind-stretching light,
A soul-stirring light?

Or do you need:

A hand-holding light,
An embracing light,
A kindly light?

Or, do you find yourself more and more these days really longing for:

A refining light,
A hallowing light,
A sanctifying light?

How many of you are saying, "I need all of these, please"? Well, the good news is that the Light of Jesus Christ is all of these kinds of light—and more. Some of us, however, seem to be satisfied with—and drawn to—lesser lights:

The light of the refrigerator seems to captivate many of us,
The light from the computer,
The light from the TV,
And even what some may believe is the limelight.

Have you got a light in your life that compels you, and that seems to propel your life, more than the light of Christ does?

As well, there are lights in our lives that we may want to shrink from:

The light of the alarm clock,
The startling light over the bathroom mirror first thing in the morning,
The lights from the candles on your birthday cake,
Even the light of an ambulance that triggers painful memories.

Have you got a light in your life that blinds you to the possibilities that can be yours as you access more light from the True Light?

Again, the good news is that the Savior's light, the light of Christ, can help us with all of these other lights. The Savior Jesus Christ is the source of all light. He is the Master of all light. He is the Light of the World.

And he has given his light—the Light of Christ, the Spirit of Christ, the Light of Truth—to everyone. The Light of Christ is a free gift, a glorious, divine inheritance, that allows each person to distinguish good from evil.

Without the Light of Christ, all nature would wither, all vision would disappear, all the stars would fall out of alignment, our ability to know good from evil would be obliterated, and God would not be able to communicate with us, his children.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained that the light of Christ is "the instrumentality and agency by which Deity keeps in touch and communes with all his children, both the righteous and the wicked." Doesn't that sound like a great homing and paging device? "[The light of Christ] has an edifying, enlightening, and uplifting influence on men [and women]. One of its manifestations is called conscience, through which all men [and women] know right from wrong.

"It is the means by which the Lord invites and entices all [women and] men to improve their lot and to come unto him and receive his gospel. . . .

". . . By following the light of Christ, [women and] men are led to the gospel covenant, to the baptismal covenant, to the church and kingdom. There they receive the Holy Ghost" (*A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985], 259–60).

When we read in Doctrine and Covenants 88:7–13 that the Light of Christ is in the sun and in the moon and in the stars and the earth—is that not thrilling? And when you catch even a glimpse of what it means that his Light, the Light of Christ, gives light to your eyes and quickens your understanding—does that not uplift, amaze, and humble you, all in the same sparkling moment?

When you need more light in your life, consider reading, pondering, and praying about Doctrine and Covenants 88, and see what happens. This section gives me that "I don't dare breathe" kind of feeling. You know those times of reading the scriptures when you feel yourself getting close to something more wonderful than you've uncovered or discovered before and you don't want to breathe for fear of dislodging the increasing light? Doctrine and Covenants 88 is one of my light-filled scriptural oases, the effect of which is so much better than that of any tricyclic antidepressant the world has to offer.

The Lord loves to teach us about light, which then adds to our light. Listen to what

he says: "That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light" (D&C 50:24).

Do you see how generous the Lord is? He gives us the Light of Christ that guides us to even more light. Do you think he loves light? And do you think he loves you? And do you think he desires for you to love light and to be lifted, enlightened, and loved and to have the kind of light, love, and life that he has?

So, how can we get more light in our lives?

Remember Mahonri Moriancumr, the brother of Jared? When he needed more light in his life, how did he go about it?

I love the interaction between the Lord and the brother of Jared. The Lord gave Jared's brother a task, one that he had never done before. The Lord helped him with some things about the building of the required vessels and helped him with some of the problems. But when it came to getting light in the vessels, the Lord took a different approach. In Ether 2:23 the Lord says to the brother of Jared, "What will ye that I should do?" and then basically teaches the principle of "study it out in your mind and then get back to me."

I believe that this principle is a vital key for us as we search diligently for more light. If we don't work, put forth effort to study out the situations for which we need more light, we'll never get it, because we will never have a specific plan to offer to the Lord and to work with the Lord on.

As the brother of Jared followed the principled process which involved faith in his every footstep, the culminating enlightening moment was not when the Lord touched the well-prepared sixteen stones but rather was when the brother of Jared saw the spirit body of the Lord. Mahonri Moriancumr received more light than he had ever thought of, wondered about—or planned for.

And why? The Lord tells us in Ether 3:15: "And never have I showed myself unto man whom I have created, for never has man believed in me as thou hast." The brother of Jared's faith had invited full visual disclosure of the Lord.

Again, I'm struck with the great desire on the part of the Lord to give us all the light we need and all the light our faith can draw forth. But that requires diligent effort, dedicated demonstration of our faith, and sustained searching by us. The brother of Jared searched diligently in the light of Christ. And I hope that the sister of Jared would have done the same.

Our theme for this women's conference is Moroni 7:19: "Wherefore, I beseech of you, . . . that ye should search diligently in the light of Christ that ye may know good from evil; and if ye will lay hold upon every good thing, and condemn it not, ye certainly will be a child of Christ."

Here Moroni is giving us his father Mormon's words and at a time when Moroni didn't think he himself would still be alive, let alone writing more on the plates. Here are his words in the beginning of the book of Moroni: "I had supposed not to have written more, but I have not as yet perished" (Moroni 1:1).

That puts a whole new spin on "publish or perish" doesn't it? More importantly it adds a whole other level of urgent credibility to these words of injunction and promise. These are some of the last recordings of a man who thought he would be dead! What does he carefully select to conclude his record? I appreciate the words of Marilyn Arnold as she reflects on the great worth of Moroni's recordings. She says: "Not only did [Moroni] conclude and conceal the record, but he made of his very life a shield around it." I like that. "Preserving it became perhaps the primary purpose of his existence. We cannot begin to contemplate its preciousness to him who had lost everything but his life and his resolute faith" (*Sweet Is the Word: Reflections on the Book of Mormon—Its Narrative, Teachings, and People* [American Fork, Utah: Covenant, 1996], 345).

Among these words of great price are these: "Search Diligently in the Light of Christ" (Moroni 7:19). We need faith in Christ to be willing to search diligently in his light. Both in the scriptures and in hymns written with light we are entreated to:

"Be faithful in Christ" (Moroni 9:25).
"Trust in Christ" (Moroni 9:22).
"Be perfected in him" (Moroni 10:32).
"Pray . . . in the name of Christ" (2 Nephi 32:9).
Be "alive in Christ" (Moroni 8:12).
"Have faith in his name" (Moroni 7:38).
"Rest in the Lord" (Psalm 37:7).
"Walk in the light of the Lord" (2 Nephi 12:5).

And now here we are urged to:

"Search diligently in the light of Christ" (Moroni 7:19).

In each of these injunctions I hear a compelling invitation to intertwine our lives with the Savior, nesting our lives in his power, light, and love. That means nesting our difficulties, struggles, temptations, loneliness, disappointments, sorrows, pains, and, yes, also our successes and joys in him—and in that nesting to find the strength, comfort, answers, and rest for which we are so diligently, even desperately, searching.

Why didn't Mormon use the preposition *with*? No, he doesn't want us to search diligently "with" the light of Christ—that could imply a separateness from us, something external to us. What Mormon plants in our minds is an "embedded IN reciprocity" between us and the light of our Savior.

When Mormon admonishes us to search diligently in the light of Christ so that we can know good from evil, I hear his wisdom about these last days—our days—in which

some women do indeed "call evil good, and good evil," and some "put darkness for light, and light for darkness," and some "put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" (2 Nephi 15:20).

The ability to distinguish good from evil, light from darkness, is soul-threateningly important. These days many call physical, emotional, and even sexual abuse, love. Others call the freedom that comes through choosing to keep the Lord's commandments, confining. Some call the prophets, men without vision; and others call wickedness, a right!

Many of you may say, "Good from evil? That's not a problem for me. I'm trying to figure out 'better from best' these days." There may, however, be other distinctions that need to be discerned in your life, other distinctions that either invite more light into your life or dispel the light that is already there. Your spiritual wattage will often be increased or diminished, depending on the distinctions you make and hold to.

Let's consider the situation of a woman experiencing what some may call "dark days." One woman wondered, "Am I depressed or exhausted?" Another queried, "Is this a problem that I need to live with, or need to conquer? Do I need to make a place for depression in my life, or put depression in its place?" And there are times when divine discontent (Elder Neal A. Maxwell's term) also needs to be distinguished from depression. Through a relationship lens, the dark days may be viewed as "a bad case of being overworked and underappreciated by those closest to her." Appropriate treatment would follow. And speaking of treatment, one woman expressed her current dilemma as, "These days I don't know if it's Prozac or peace I feel!"

Other distinctions abound, and they influence how we search diligently in the light of Christ and what we find. "Should I gratify my needs, or fulfill the measure of my creation?" "Is the new, time-consuming, very exciting project in my life one more step in fulfilling the measure of my creation, or really just a distraction, constituting one giant step backwards or sideways?" "During sacrament meetings do I experience increased sentimentality, or deepening spirituality?" "In my relationships do I distinguish what is worth speaking up about from that which is worth keeping quiet about? And when I do speak up, do others experience my voice as one of repetitive encouragement, or as nagging?" And in times of tragedy we search diligently to discern: "Was this accidental death a horrible mistake, or actually a healing, making the very ground upon which it happened hallowed?"

Sometimes we as LDS women make distinctions about each other that are not useful. These distinctions, as do all others, come complete with embedded assumptions, expectations, and permission to behave in certain ways toward the groups so distinguished. Among our sometimes too deeply ingrained distinctions are:

- Those women who do crafts, and those who don't.
- Those who work outside the home, and those who don't.
- Those who are married, and those who aren't.
- Those who do their visiting teaching, and those who don't.

Those who are presently participating in Church activities,
and those who are not.

Should we go so far as to say that these distinctions, which subtly and perhaps in some instances not so subtly, embed the assumption of good LDS women versus evil LDS women—should we say that these very distinctions are in themselves evil? These distinctions certainly do not knit our hearts together nor make us his.

Mormon proposes that once we discern good from evil that we commence to lay hold upon every good thing. Before we can lay hold upon good things, however, I believe that we have to lay down some things first. Let me offer you six beliefs that I find prevent women from laying hold upon every good thing:

1. The belief that we have to lay hold upon every good thing all at once. The grand smorgasbord of life is before you. It all looks so good. What do you choose? Can you have it all? More important, can you have it right now and all at once? Most women who appear to have it all, all at once, have taught me that they usually pay quite a high price with their or family members' physical, emotional, mental, or relationship health. One woman lamented, "I wish that someone would have told me that I had to make a choice."

So what's a woman to do? The scriptures tell us: "To every thing there is a season" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). And we all know that the season is in "the Lord's due time."

Speaking of time, there are times that we need to "run with patience the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1), and at the same time we are not supposed to run faster than we're able (Mosiah 4:27). And there will be many times that we need to stand still (D&C 5:34), to "be still and know that [he is] God" (D&C 101:16).

That leads us to the next constraining belief.

2. The belief that you know how your life should be and will be, and that you are the captain of your ship. Being so certain about how your life will be, how your life will turn out, may constrain you from being open to ongoing personal revelation from the Lord that can shift the direction of your life—even in a moment, moving you away from your destination and even away from your shipmates.

Made-to-measure ironies are part of each woman's compressed personalized curriculum of life. The constraining belief that your plan for your life is the only one that counts causes problems when your life-ironies challenge your five-year plans—and some weeks even your five-day plans. The outcome is usually bitterness, weeping, wailing, and grinding, if not gnashing, of teeth. How different the outcome when your made-to-measure ironies are met with responses of humility, resiliency, and a diligent searching for more light in order to live *fully* the unexpected life.

My mother loved the lights in the firmament. Each comet, each planet, each star—falling or not—each phase of the moon, was something to celebrate. She would call me

from 150 miles away and excitedly say, "Run out and look at the moon." She wanted to share the good light she was seeing.

One of my mother's made-to-measure ironies was that in the last months of her life, she lost her physical vision. She was blind. She, who had taught others to open their eyes to see more clearly, more widely and with more appreciation and enthusiasm, now had her eyes veiled—until she passed through the veil.

I came to learn through this experience that even personalized ironies-by-proxy require extra light to endure; however, enduring—rather than just persevering—often tutors us into remembering who we really are, perhaps even jogging loose a preexistent memory of a commitment or two.

3. The belief that you are more correct than others: the sin of certainty! (R. Maturana, *Biology, Emotions, and Culture* [videotape 6], Nov. 1992 [Calgary, Alberta, Canada: Vanry and Associates]). Believing that there is one right way to look at something and you have it does not invite others or more light into your life. Wives have found that when they "know" the one right way to view everything and do everything, husbands are not invited to intertwine their lives, to really forge a marriage relationship.

When we hold to the belief that we are right and others are wrong, there is no room, let alone need, for further light. We already have it all—or so we believe. Our sin of certainty and subsequent actions make it so there is no room for others to co-create with us even more good things.

What there is room for, however, what is invited in, is unrighteous dominion. And Elder H. Burke Peterson has pointed out that women can do unrighteous dominion just as well as men can ("Unrighteous Dominion," *Ensign*, July 1989, 7).

4. The belief that words don't matter, that words can't hurt—a belief promoted by that old childhood rhyme "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." What a terrible thing to teach a child in the name of building thick skins. Thick skins, yes; thin hearts, absolutely.

First Peter 2:1 speaks to the importance of words. We are counseled to "lay aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, . . . and all evil speakings."

Words do matter. They lodge in our cells and in our souls.

One woman said: "My husband's words hit me, and they hurt me so much. I think the word *stupid* is the meanest word in the whole world, because I've heard it so much. I'm not stupid. I know I'm not, but it still hurts because this is the person I love, and when he says that, it makes me feel so bad. It hurts. It hurts so much. It hurts my soul. My soul wants to run away and hide. But I can't because this is my marriage."

This young couple had been struggling with difficulties in their relationship from the

beginning of their less than two-year marriage. They were successful in resolving their difficulties once they worked together on dissolving the barrier of words they had unwittingly co-created.

Over time, cutting words turn into conversations of accusation and recrimination. (L. M. Wright, W. L. Watson, and J. M. Bell, *Beliefs: The Heart of Healing in Families and Illness* [New York: Basic Books, 1996]). These conversations are filled with complaints of unfulfilled expectations: "You never . . .", "You didn't" . . . Each person suffers emotionally and even physically, and the relationship disintegrates.

At the same time that we want to use building words, just saying good words is not enough. In 1 Peter 1:22 we read about the need for unfeigned love. Feigned love occurs when the words of love are present, yet the behavior of love is not. Recently I met with a young premarital couple. In that anguishing interview, they repeatedly threw the venomous words of *hate, trapped, violated, and oppressed* back and forth at each other and then juxtaposed all of those with the sacred word *love*.

Instead of "I love you," this couple needed to add a few more words in between *I love* and *you* to represent more accurately their experiences in their relationship: "*I love oppressing you.*" "*I love how you squirm when I berate you.*" "*I love seeing you suffer.*" "*I love being more right than you are—and showing you that!*" Using the word *love* is not enough. If the word *love* doesn't fit with your behavior and with the experience of the one you claim so to "love," please use another word.

So, again, words do matter. They lodge in our cells and in our souls. Dr. Maya Angelou, poet laureate, even believes words lodge in the walls of our homes. If words lodge in the cells—souls—and walls, we need words—and tones that accompany those words—which build and maintain the temples of our bodies and the temples of our homes.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland spoke of a hopeful, encouraging, peaceful word in October 1996 general conference. Do you remember that word? It was *repentance*. He said: "The very beauty of the word *repentance* is the promise of escaping old problems and old habits and old sorrows and old sins. It is among the most hopeful and encouraging—and yes, most peaceful—words in the gospel vocabulary" (*Ensign*, Nov. 1996, 83).

His words on the word *repentance* lead us to our next constraining belief.

5. The troublesome belief that sounds like this: "My past, which was filled with wrongdoing, predicts and determines my future. I am not worthy to lay hold upon any good thing, let alone every good thing, because I am bad, tainted, unclean, beyond hope!" Does that sound familiar? For far too many women, it does.

This constraining belief needs to be laid on the altar of repentance. The guilt and grief you feel are a good sign, an indication of your continued goodness, in spite of your sins. Congratulate yourself on still being able to feel guilty! The light is still there! Guilt has had a lot of bad press in the past, yet for most of us, guilt, if used well, is exactly the help

most of us need to stop sinning and start toward full repentance.

Let the guilt start you on the path of the sincere, heartfelt, and therefore heart-changing process of laying down your sins, even giving away your sins to know the Lord (Alma 22:18). And as you come to know him, and come unto him, you will also come to know the *real* you, unshackled and free from your past.

The Savior and your ecclesiastical leaders will lead you along. The Savior really did mean it when he said, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18).

Your Savior and your ecclesiastical leaders will help you with your beliefs about repentance. My heart still aches for the woman who years ago told me she believed that sin was like taking a smooth, beautiful board and pounding nails in it and that repentance was like pulling the nails out of the board. With repentance, the nails would be gone, but the board would still be left marred with holes from the nails, never to be as it was in the beginning. She indicated she learned this in Primary. (I say "learned" because I am not sure what the teacher believed she taught.) But this woman, as a little child, held that image of sin and repentance and proceeded to mark herself for life as permanently unclean and unworthy. Oh, how we need to be careful about our metaphors when teaching children! The only board and nails that are important in teaching about repentance are the ones that built the cross upon which the Savior was crucified for our sins.

This particular woman's belief that nothing she could do would ever make the board whole again is partially right. She can't do it, especially on her own. That's why she needs to take the board to the Savior. His grace is more than sufficient, not just to remove the nails but to remove the holes and to make the board whole again, as though the nails had never been there. When the Lord says he will remember your sins no more (Hebrews 8:12), why would he leave nail holes in the board so that we would remember the sins? It is the prints of the nails in his hands and feet that he wants us to remember.

More miraculous than any board restoration is what the Savior can and will do to restore this woman as she comes unto him. He will make her whole.

I love what the Lord says in Doctrine and Covenants 61:2: "I, the Lord, forgive sins, and am merciful unto those who confess their sins with humble hearts."

Can't you hear the Savior saying, "Please believe me. This is what I do. I forgive sins. Bring your humble heart and confess your sins, and I will extend my mercy. We are a team. You do your part, and I'll do mine."

He really does reach our reaching, as the hymn says. (See *Hymns* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985], 129).

I believe that as each of us brings her true desire to take responsibility for her wrong choices, experiences deep remorse and anguish, and turns totally away from her past sins—

even her favorite ones—and begins enjoying the freedom that comes through choosing to keep the commandments and devotes time to building up the kingdom—each one can experience the Savior saying, "Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole" (Matthew 9:22). He said it to the woman who touched the hem of his garment, and he will say it to you.

6. The constraining belief that involves unforgiveness and sounds something like this: "I don't have to forgive bad, mean, or horrible people."

Many of us act as if forgiveness and repentance are only for the righteous: "Oh, she's a good person. I forgive her."

What about those people who have caused you physical, emotional, mental and/or spiritual pain and suffering? What about those who have broken almost every commandment and have profoundly affected your life through their choice to sin? Do you have to forgive *them*?

Let's see what the Lord says. In Doctrine and Covenants 64:10 he says: "I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men."

There are a lot of women who act as if this scripture reads in the reverse. These women want to pick and choose whom they will forgive, based on their own standard of forgiveability, and their ultimate criterion seems to be that the sinner must suffer more than those who have suffered at the hands of the sinner.

And what happens if we don't forgive others who have wronged us? The Lord is very clear about the outcome in 3 Nephi 13:14 and 15: "For, if ye forgive men their trespasses your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if ye forgive not men their trespasses neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

And in Doctrine and Covenants 64:9 he tells us of an additional outcome of unforgiveness: "Wherefore, I say unto you, that ye ought to forgive one another; for he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the greater sin."

Could he possibly mean that by our not forgiving someone who has wronged and harmed us that we become more sinful than the initial sinner?

I believe the Lord is serious. He hasn't just provided his words to us to give us something to read at night. His words are given to us because he means them. He has set a great example for us of saying what he means and meaning what he says.

In my clinical practice I see the outcome, the impact, of unforgiveness. Unforgiveness leads to increased suffering. Unforgiveness is lethal. It lodges in our minds, hearts, cells, and souls and wreaks havoc, causing more mental, emotional, physical, and

spiritual pain and agony than even the initial sin brought about.

The Lord's plea for us to give up hanging onto the sins of others in no way lessens the gravity of what the initial sinner did. As the proclamation on the family states: "We warn that individuals who violate covenants of chastity, who abuse spouse or offspring, or who fail to fulfill family responsibilities will one day stand accountable before God" ("The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102). But if we find ourselves drumming our fingers and saying to the sinner, either out loud or under our breath, "Your day will come," we just may have a little more work to do on forgiveness.

In Doctrine and Covenants 64:8 the Lord tells us that we are to forgive one another in our hearts. Doesn't that speak to the depths of the forgiveness that we need to develop? He doesn't say, "Forgive one another in your mouths"; that might be like just saying the words to the sinner, "I forgive you." And he doesn't say, "Forgive one another in your minds"; that might be like saying to ourselves, "Well, I forgive her." But to forgive in our hearts involves much more, so much more: Roto-Rooter™ cleansing of our hearts so that all the unforgiveness is gone and can never come back—a deep spring-cleaning of our hearts, even a change of heart.

This kind of forgiving is not easy, not something that happens overnight, but it is possible or the Lord would not have asked us to do it.

He has commanded us to forgive others. Therefore, we need to find a way. And he will help us if we ask him. "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded" (1 Nephi 3:7). Doesn't that scripture give us the courage to search diligently in the light of Christ to find the process that will free us from the constraints of unforgiveness?

In conversations with the Lord, with caring people, and perhaps with the initial sinner, unforgiveness can be dispelled—healing can happen.

Study it out in your mind: What things have you already forgiven the sinner for? What things have you almost forgiven the sinner for? What things do you need the sinner's help with in order to forgive? What questions would you like to ask the sinner that would move you just one step closer to forgiveness? What would constitute a sufficient apology from the sinner to you? What else would the sinner need to do and for how long?

And the outcome of your efforts to move toward forgiveness? Psychologically, you will be freer; physically, you will be healthier; and spiritually, you will be more able to get on with fulfilling the measure of your creation.

Now that we have laid aside six constraining beliefs, I'm captivated with Mormon's words: "Lay hold upon every good thing" (Moroni 7:19). When we "lay hold" upon something, it becomes real to us. There is an implied permanence, a focusing, an embracing, and a making something your own.

What happens when we find a good thing but just touch it lightly?

What's the impact of persistent superficial reading of the scriptures?

What's the impact of a tenuous testimony?

What's the impact of service that is done to be seen of women?

What happens when we join the Church in the same way that some of us join a gym, only to show up sporadically but without any real sense of membership, commitment, involvement, or working?

What happens when year after year we do not lay hold upon the good things but continue to touch them only lightly?

After a while, we may find that we are crying, but not unto the Lord. We may find that we are not losing our life in his service and for his sake and thus finding our lives (Matthew 10:39) but rather that we're just losing our life, losing our heart's former desires, losing our stamina, and sadly, even losing our interest in good things.

Discouragement and despondency may set in, and we may wonder what is wrong when we are "doing everything right," even though lightly.

We're doing good things, aren't we? Yes, but without depth, without passion, without deep love, without vigor, without commitment, and without laying hold upon the good things. And thus the joys that come from laying hold upon good things continually elude our feeble grasp. Thinking we have "been there, done that" with good things, we may move from touching lightly good things to playing around with good things to taking for granted good things to even making fun of good things.

Thus Mormon's words are rivetingly true: "*Lay hold upon every good thing.*"

Now, what are the good things we are to lay hold upon? What are good things?

Martha Stewart, queen of good things, points to everything from roasted garlic to books in which to keep paint samples and proclaims, "It's a good thing!"

Another Martha, years ago, with a sister named Mary, got a lesson from the Savior about good things. There they were: sisters, both faithful, devoted disciples of Jesus. Martha was busy making preparations for the evening meal. Mary was drawn to the light of the Savior and proceeded to feast on the spiritual food he offered. Martha seems to have been suffering a bit from the sin of certainty. She seems to have been under the influence of the following belief: "There is one right way to behave when a guest comes to visit, and I'm doing it."

When Martha drifted into the comparison mode and complained, "Make her do what

I'm doing; I'm serving you in the best way," Jesus offered a mild reproof of Martha along the lines of, Martha, Martha, you've got an amazing attention to detail, and you're worried about a lot of things related to this evening meal, "but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part"—and then the clincher—"which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42).

I like both of these women. I can relate to each of them, can't you?

Before the Savior's gentle chiding, I would have liked to hire Martha to cater any event I was having; however, after she was invited by the Savior to reflect on what is good, I think she would make a great education counselor. Can you imagine the great discussions she would facilitate as she would guide her teachers to invite the women to reflect on a key concept—through questions and stories and discussion—so that the idea could have a greater chance to take hold upon the women's hearts and minds? And I'd love to have Mary as my homemaking counselor: She has already caught the vision that homemaking involves the daily application of gospel principles.

What are the good things that you need and want in your life? What are the good things that you already have in your life—that you do not want taken from you? In your deepest heart of hearts, what constitutes "good things" for you these days?

How about your family? We are all members of a family. Is yours a good thing?

Here are two pieces of evidence that your family is a good thing:

1. The proclamation on the family from the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles in September 1995. Since the organization of the Church in 1830, this is only the fifth time a proclamation has been issued. Does that tell you something about the importance of this proclamation? Have you got a copy of it in your home—that you read? How has it already helped you and your family?

2. How much time and energy the adversary is giving to the unraveling of families. We know that Satan hates families. He got kicked out of his, and he will never be a father. Is there any wonder he's working so hard to undermine your efforts to co-create family relationships that sustain—in every sense of the word?

Are you laying hold upon every good thing in your family?

What good quality about your husband have you been noticing these days?

What good thing about your sister has been waiting for you to lay hold upon?

Have you taken time to search diligently, with increasing light on the subject, the good in your mother, father, nephew, or child, in your spouse, in yourself—or are you going for the superficial, not very time-consuming approach to marriage and family living? Family relationships based on the "don't ask, don't tell" approach to communication lead to family

relationships that drain and strain and those that will never sustain you.

When was the last time your child overheard you talking on the phone to a friend, saying something wonderful about your child, like, "I don't know what I ever did to merit having a daughter who. . . ." "I don't know why I'm so blessed to have a son who. . . ."

And what about those family members who are currently concerning you with obstreperous behavior and borderline—perhaps even full blown—prodigal-son-like behavior. They still have good things about them, and now is the time to study them, lay hold upon every good thing about them, and have their goodness become real—for you and for them.

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught: "Nothing is so much calculated to lead people to forsake sin as to take them by the hand, and watch over them with tenderness. When persons manifest the least kindness and love to me, O what power it has over my mind, while the opposite course has a tendency to harrow up all the harsh feelings and depress the human mind" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938], 240).

So, let's talk about commendations versus condemnations.

I believe that increased light in family relationships increases the ability to offer commendations and decreases the need to offer condemnations. I also believe that increased commendations indeed increase the light in your family!

Why?

Because in order to offer commendations, compliments, praises, you have to really study a situation. This is no place for fluffy, positive comments based on superficial encounters of the faraway kind. It's time to get up close and personal. You need to care enough to look closely, to notice, to see your family members in a new light, and to be able to commend them on their goodness, their competence, their courage, their tenacity, perhaps even their patience with you. That means you need to be present with them in a very different way, and that different way of being together will invite more light—and your ability to lay hold upon even more good things will increase.

One of the marvelous things about commendations is that they increase the likelihood that your other words will be received with increased influence. Isn't that just what Joseph Smith told us? Listen to his words again: "When persons manifest the least kindness and love to me, O what power it has over my mind."

Is it any wonder that relationships start building naturally and securely in a commendation-saturated environment?

The commendations build into conversations of affirmation and affection, which continue to confirm you and your family members' worth and value. These conversations

assist in healing the mind, body, and spirit. When was the last time you had a heart-to-heart talk with a family member that in some way healed you?

Researchers have become very interested in the ratio of positive to negative communication that needs to be present in a marriage to keep it on a pathway to improvement and increased happiness. (J. Gottman and N. Silver, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994]). I believe that their findings apply to all family relationships and to those relationships that feel like family.

The magic ratio the researchers found was 5:1. That is, as long as there is at least five times more affection, humor, smiling, complimenting, agreement, empathy, and active, nondefensive listening than there is criticism and disagreement, your marriage and other relationships will prosper. So, what does the ratio in your home look like these days? If it felt like a sweet reprieve to jump into your car and drive here to women's conference to escape yet another potentially escalating battle of words, you may just want to start to do whatever needs to be done to make it possible to share even a few more conversations of affirmation and affection with your family members.

As you increase the conversations of affirmation and affection and decrease the conversations of accusation and recrimination and condemnation, every good thing about your family will become more palpable and therefore easier for you to lay hold upon. Not only that, but because there is such a connection between light and love, the increasing love in your family will invite more light, and reciprocally the increased light will invite more love. Now, how's that for a virtuous cycle?

What other good things are you drawn toward? What other good things would you like to lay hold upon?

A greater understanding of the scriptures?

More peace in your life?

More what? How about every good thing that is mentioned in the hymn "More Holiness Give Me"? (*Hymns*, no. 131).

If you were to lay hold upon

*More holiness . . . ,
More strivings within,
More patience in suff'ring,
More sorrow for sin,
More faith in [your] Savior,
More sense of his care,
More joy in his service,
More purpose in prayer*

—what differences would you notice in your life?

And which of the following good things would help you the most these days?

*More gratitude . . . ,
More trust in the Lord,
More pride in his glory,
More hope in his word,
More tears for his sorrows,
More pain at his grief,
More meekness in trial,
More praise for relief.*

And what would you be able to do that you cannot do now, if you were to wake up tomorrow morning and find that you had indeed

*More purity . . . ,
More strength to o'ercome,
More freedom from earthstains,
More longing for home.*

What would be different if you really felt more fit for the kingdom and you were ready to be more used by the Savior?

And finally, what picture comes to your mind when you imagine yourself laying hold upon the experience of being more blessed and holy and, indeed, being more like the Savior?

How could all these good things be possible?

Mormon tells us, in the last verse of Moroni 7, to "pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love [which is charity], which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons [and daughters] of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure."

Today is the day for us as LDS women to search diligently in the light of Christ and to make choices that invite an increase of his light into our lives so that we can "lay hold upon every good thing." And may we through persistent, mighty prayer access his atoning power and thus increasingly see as the Savior sees and love as he loves and certainly become his own is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.