

Merrill J. Bateman and Marilyn S. Bateman, "Lay Hold upon Every Good Thing," *Religious Educator* 2, no. 2 (2001): 13–24.

Lay Hold upon Every Good Thing

Merrill J. and Marilyn S. Bateman

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Elder Bateman: We welcome you to the first, official devotional of the 2001–2002 school year. We welcome a television audience that stretches across the United States and around the earth via satellite. One week ago Sister Bateman and I were prepared to address this same forum when tragedy struck New York City and the Pentagon. The events of that day have had an impact not only on the United States but on the entire world. Most governments now realize that no one is safe if terrorists are allowed free rein to develop secret networks and plan strikes against innocent people. It reminds one of the Gadianton robbers, who lived in a day long ago. The Book of Mormon indicates that they were experts in wickedness, lived in the wilderness, operated through secret combinations in the settled parts of the land, and were difficult to find and destroy (see Helaman 2:4, 11; 3:23). Could there be a more apt description of the enemy we are now facing?

The past week has sobered everyone and caused us to reflect on the sanctity of life. The tragedy has made clear that, for many, the most important aspect of life is found in family relationships. In the midst of the rubble, rescuers have uncovered the dead clutching family photos. One man who escaped from the crashing towers indicated how grateful he was that he could hug his children one more time. The last words heard from a husband to his wife were "I love you!" And then there are men and women, young and old, waiting near the crash sites displaying pictures of their loved ones and hoping for a miracle. Someone has said that God will turn the evil into good. If the citizens of this and other nations recognize their frailties and turn to God for help, good will be the outcome.

However, experience indicates that transformations are seldom permanent unless one is deeply touched by the Holy Spirit. I repeat my statement from last week: "You young people hold the power of peace for the world in your hands. The world depends on you." Christ depends on you. The message of the Master must be written in your hearts so that you may extend it to others. Christ's healing power is more than physical. He has the power to make a person whole, to heal the soul as well as the body. The magnificent painting by Carl Heinrich Bloch of *Christ Healing the Sick at the Pool of Bethesda* portrays Christ both as a healer and a comforter. The original painting, a wonderful gift, has just arrived on campus and will be the signature piece for the Museum of Art. We hope it will be a constant reminder of our heritage and our mission.

Sister Bateman and I approach this occasion with concern, knowing and feeling the responsibility that is ours to teach and uplift. The theme we have chosen is taken from the seventh chapter of Moroni, wherein Mormon explains that "the Spirit of Christ is given to every [person], that [they] may know good from evil" (Moroni 7:16). Mormon then counsels the Nephites to "search diligently in the light of Christ . . . and . . . lay hold upon every good thing" (Moroni 7:19).

Given the events of last week, we wish to discuss the opportunity that you have to search in the light and to lay hold upon good things that bring lasting happiness. As young adults you are in

the midst of the most critical decision-making period of life. It is important that you have the light and faith to make right decisions, to discern good from evil, to hold onto and develop the things that the Lord has in store for you. It is interesting that Satan offered Adam and Eve the opportunity to know good and evil (see Genesis 3:5). In contrast, Mormon indicates the purpose of mortality is to help us to “know good *from* evil” (Moroni 7:19; emphasis added). One can know evil without tasting it.

BYU provides an opportunity for you to achieve this aim. It represents an opportunity to search in the light. It is a community of enlightened people, both intellectually and spiritually. The environment is shaped by people of character, people who are honest, people who have made right choices. It is an ideal place to pursue Mormon’s injunction.

Let us show a Minerva Teichert painting called *The House of the World* that illustrates the importance of making right choices. The painting is of Lehi’s dream of the tree of life. I would like to draw your attention to the large and spacious building with its gold dome, statues, and multitudes of people. One would think that it is the most important symbol in Lehi’s dream. Even though it is in the background of the painting, it is so bright and inviting that it commands attention and attempts to overshadow other parts of the story. The building rises up from the water having no foundation, and a careful examination reveals that blue sky pierces the open door and windows. As Professor John Welch and Doris Dant note, “The great building is merely a facade with the sky showing through the door and windows, appropriate for a symbol of the pride and ‘vain imaginations’ of the world” (1 Nephi 12:18).¹ In reality the building is a deceitful sham, a storefront with nothing below it, above it, or behind it. It is the empty life with nothing of value in it. And it represents the pride of the world.

However, the real story is in the foreground. It is the pathos of a family struggling to hold onto good things, to find their way to the tree of life and to partake of its fruit. Two sons have left the safety of the path and iron rod, whereas others continue the journey. The tree is a symbol for Christ, and the fruits of the tree are the blessings of His Atonement. You will note in the painting that the tree is not highlighted. It is off to the side and in the shadow of the building. Sister Teichert knew that in life it is easier to follow the crowd and the ways of the world than it is to discipline one’s appetites along the strait and narrow road to life. As Jesus said: “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matthew 7:13–14).

With the painting as a figurative metaphor, what are the good things you can grasp and internalize while at Brigham Young University? There are three good things that we challenge you to lay hold upon and incorporate in your lives. The first is to make a commitment to build an eternal family and thereby establish your eternal identity. The second is to maintain your personal purity. The third is to learn by study and by faith. Sister Bateman will discuss the first objective.

Sister Marilyn S. Bateman: Let me add my welcome to President Bateman’s. For the last forty-two years my major interest and focus have been the creation of an eternal family. I believe it is the most important mission a man or woman can pursue. When one realizes that Heavenly Father’s work and glory is to raise and educate children, one can understand why I believe that my work has been in partnership with Him and why it is the most exciting work on earth. If earthly parents are wise and desire a fullness of joy, they will strive to emulate our heavenly parents. Many of the lessons needed in this life and in the next are learned in the family setting.

That is why I determined many years ago to focus my energies on the greatest calling of all—to be a mother, wife, and daughter in Zion. I recognize that not all have the opportunity in this life to be a mother or father. But everyone is a son or daughter, and most are a sister or brother, an aunt or uncle. Everyone plays a role in an earthly family, and everyone may build an eternal family.

My subject today centers on the family. Some of you, the freshmen in particular, may feel that the decisions regarding a companion and starting a family are a few years away. But you are an important part of your parents' family, and the choices you make today and in the near future will affect personal family decisions later. For others in the audience, spousal and parental decisions are already upon you.

Build Eternal Families

Minerva Teichert's painting of the tree of life reminds us of the importance of having a vision of what life can be. This includes the vision of a family in the eternities. It is important to set goals, establish priorities, and then "hold fast [to] that which is good" (Thessalonians 5:21). The painting illustrates the importance of family relationships and the challenges that can come. The family of Lehi and Sariah, depicted in the painting, is a type for all families. Lehi and his family's journey to the promised land is symbolic of our journey through life. Our ultimate goal is to obtain an inheritance in the heavenly city. In the Minerva Teichert painting, Lehi is inviting his family to come to the tree and partake of the fruit of eternal life. He is inviting them to come to Christ and build an eternal family. The decision regarding one's spouse is the second-most important decision in life. It is second only to the decision to follow Christ.

Sisters, suppose you have found a wonderful companion and then one day he arrives home from work and announces that the family should leave for the desert. Your nice home and all that is in it will be left behind, and you will live in a tent for eight years. He asks you to organize the children and bring the scriptures, a few clothes, and some food. What would your answer be? Suppose your husband indicates that an angel has appeared to him and has told him to leave! Would your answer change? Brothers and sisters, trust between husband and wife is a most valuable possession. Living the gospel together is your only protection. Find a companion who will live the gospel and be worthy of your trust!

Husbands, suppose the day comes when you have a dream and your wife agrees to support you. But the dream takes longer to fulfill than you expected, and there are trials along the way. Again, living the gospel and focusing on an eternal family will sustain you in life's trials.

The painting illustrates the tender feelings that parents have for children and how anxious they are to have all of them complete the journey. Most of us are familiar with the story and are aware of the conflict that exists. Laman and Lemuel rejected the counsel of their parents. But Nephi and Sam learned for themselves that their father spoke the truth (see 1 Nephi 2:16). In spite of the expressions of love and the pleadings to "rebel no more" (2 Nephi 1:24), Laman and Lemuel chose the ways of the world.

In the painting the prophet Lehi has arrived at the tree and has partaken of the fruit. Holding to the rod with one hand, he offers fruit in the other and invites his family to come and partake. Sariah, the mother, is in the foreground, almost overcome with both joy and sadness. First, dropping to her knees in a sign of humility, she recognizes the tree as a symbol for Christ. Second, she sees Laman and Lemuel in a small boat making their way to the large and spacious building. In the process of losing two sons, she pleads with them to return while pointing to the

tree. Nephi, feeling Sariah's sorrow, holds the rod in one hand and reaches down with the other to help his mother. How important it is for children to support their parents!

Family relationships are important and crucial to a child's development. Children need parents and parents need children. Brothers and sisters play a vital role in the faithfulness of other siblings. Sister Teichert illustrates the importance of one brother strengthening another by showing Sam holding onto Nephi. In contrast, Laman and Lemuel do not provide leadership for their brothers and sisters. As Lehi learned of Laman and Lemuel's fate through the dream, he "feared lest they should be cast off from the presence of the Lord" (1 Nephi 8:36). Nevertheless he continued to counsel and work with them. As a parent he never gave up on his children. The scripture reads, "And he did exhort them . . . with all the feeling of a tender parent, that they would hearken to his words" (1 Nephi 8:37). Parents never give up.

Family relationships are sacred. The bonds within families have spiritual roots. We know that we lived as brothers and sisters before coming to earth. More important, we are aware that families formed on earth can be eternal. The doctrine that eternal life is familial is one of the unique teachings of our church. Families are welded together by covenant in love and service to each other. As Nephi is reaching out to assist his mother, he is demonstrating sympathy and understanding for her grief. Love is a spiritual gift and comes from the light within us. It is expressed through the service we render. Christ's life is the epitome of service and reflects His love for everyone. Families are built through service: parents to children early in life and then children to parents later. President Spencer W. Kimball said, "God does notice us, and he watches over us. But it is usually through another mortal that he meets our needs. Therefore, it is vital that we serve each other."²

And the mortals who serve us are often in the family. A few experiences in my life have taught me the truth of President Kimball's statement. I know that Heavenly Father is aware of families and that He will prompt one family member to meet the needs of another. Some years ago the Lord helped me in a time of trial as He directed our family in the support of my parents. More than twenty years ago President Bateman and I lived in New Jersey with our children. My parents lived in Provo. My father was in very poor health.

At the time my husband was working for a large, multinational firm and had just been promoted to a senior position. In the previous three years we had moved from Utah to England and then to Pennsylvania. Now the new assignment was causing us to move again, this time to New Jersey. It was the third move in three years. The children had patiently accompanied us, establishing new friends each year. We bought a new home in a beautiful area of the state and settled down for what we hoped would be a long stay. We had no desire to move again.

We had been in New Jersey only a few months when BYU President Dallin Oaks called and asked my husband to serve as dean of the School of Management. Neither of us felt that another move was appropriate. The children were adjusting to their new environment, President Bateman was happy in his work, we had just received callings in the ward and stake, and the neighbors were becoming friends. Consequently we declined the offer. During the next few months President Oaks contacted President Bateman on a number of occasions and asked if there was any chance that he might change his mind. After the third or fourth time, the Spirit touched my husband, and he knew that we should accept the BYU position and return to Provo. Even though I agreed to the move, I was uneasy and concerned for the children. Although I prayed for peace regarding the move, no confirmation came, and I wondered about the change.

One night a few weeks before we were to leave for Provo, I had a dream that awakened me in the middle of the night. In the dream I was terribly upset because my father was dying and I was

unable to return home. I woke up my husband and related the dream to him. After some discussion we felt that it was the Lord's way of assuring me that the decision to move was right. A few weeks later we arrived in Provo, where we were glad to be with our parents again. We enjoyed spending time with them and renewing family relationships. One month after our arrival we were visiting my parents when my dad began having chest pains. Mother hurriedly took him to the hospital. By evening he was gone. The experience of losing a parent is traumatic. I will never forget the sadness I felt, but I remembered the dream and now more fully understand its meaning and purpose. The month prior to my father's death was an important time for our children to become reacquainted with their grandfather and for President Bateman and me to express our love and support for both Dad and Mom. It was also important that we were there to support my mother in a time of great need. In the months that followed, our appreciation for the Lord deepened as we knew He was aware of us and had prompted us to change our course. As with Lehi and Sariah, He was willing to help in the building of an eternal family. Family relationships are sacred and are meant to be eternal. Each person in a family is important, as evidenced by last week's disaster. Each person is needed to complete the family circle. The absence of a person may leave a huge crater in the hearts of family members. Hold tightly to the iron rod. Pray that you might discern good from evil. Build strong family ties. Keep in contact with your parents and grandparents. We love you. We are grateful you are here. Work hard, be prayerful, stay faithful, and have fun. We pray that you will always "search diligently in the light of Christ" and "lay hold upon every good thing." I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Elder Merrill J. Bateman: I am grateful for Sister Bateman's role in our family. She has a sixth sense when it comes to building relationships. We now have twenty-five grandchildren. Someone asked my wife a short time ago if she knew all of their names. She was stunned and surprised by the question. Not only does she know their names, birthdays, and upcoming events concerning them, she has a personal relationship with each one. After all, they are her children, too. Whenever grandchildren visit our home, they head for the library to find Grandma, who is often reading. It is wonderful to see them embrace her and for Sister Bateman to gather the little ones in her arms. She plans family events that bring grandparents, children, and grandchildren together to build relationships. Remember, when you form your family, find ways to bind your children and grandchildren to you. And at this stage of your life, spend time with parents and grandparents before it is too late. The greatest good on this earth and in eternity is the family. You are at a critical juncture in life. Your temporal dependence on parents is diminishing, but do not let the spiritual links weaken. As President Hinckley noted in a recent BYU devotional, you must "never become a weak link in the chain of your family's generations."³

Personal Purity

Now I come to the second challenge. The creation of an eternal family depends on personal purity. This earth was created for three major purposes. The first was to allow us, God's spirit children, to obtain a physical body. The second was to test our obedience to eternal laws. The third was to create an eternal family. The three purposes are linked. You cannot accomplish the third—i.e., an eternal family—without achieving the first two. On occasion while teaching a religion class, I have asked students why it is necessary to have a body. Generally the answer is "to become like God." I then ask, "Why does God have a body?" Often there is silence, suggesting they do not know.

The physical body is essential to the creation of life. As spirit children we could not form families of our own. We did not have the power. The seeds of life are in the physical tabernacle. Perhaps that is an additional reason why our bodies are called the temple of God. Paul stated that the physical body is a temple of God because it is a house for the Holy Ghost (see 1 Corinthians 6:19–20). The sacred power of creation is given to us for a relatively short time—for only a few decades—and then removed. We are given laws and tested to see if we will respect this power, protect its use, and respect the body. If we are obedient, the power of life returns in the Resurrection. If we abuse the power and do not repent, the natural capacity to create never returns, and we live singly in the eternities (see D&C 131:1–4).

In a classic devotional here a few years ago, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland gave three reasons why sexual intimacy must be saved for marriage. In order to appreciate the reasons, one must understand the sacredness of life. The giving and taking of life are sacred parts of the Lord’s plan. Sexual sin is second only to murder (see Alma 39:5). As Elder Holland states: “Clearly God’s greatest concerns regarding mortality are how one gets into this world and how one gets out of it. These two most important issues . . . He . . . wishes most to reserve to Himself. These are the two matters that He has repeatedly told us He wants us never to take illegally, illicitly, unfaithfully, without sanction.”⁴

Given the sacredness of life, the first reason that sexual purity is so important relates to the doctrine of the soul. We are taught that “the spirit *and* the body are the soul of man” (D&C 88:15; emphasis added). And, in Elder Holland’s words: “When one toys with the God-given . . . body of another, he or she toys with the very soul of that individual, toys with the central purpose and product of life. . . . In trivializing the soul of another . . . we trivialize the atonement, which saved that soul and guaranteed its continued existence.”⁵

The second reason is that human intimacy is a sacred “symbol of total union.” Eternal marriage is intended to be a “welding” together, an “unbreakable union.” The physical relationship is an expression of a deeper spiritual bond. There is a “moral duplicity that comes from pretending we are one” when covenants have not been made.⁶

The final reason for moral purity given by Elder Holland is that “sexual union is . . . a sacrament of the highest order, a union not only of a man and a woman but very much the union of that man and that woman with God” (p. 29).

Do you see the links between personal purity and eternal families? Please understand how important it is not to swim in the river of filthy water seen by Nephi. As sure as the Mississippi River flows into the Gulf of Mexico, so the river of filth flows into the “gulf of misery” (see 1 Nephi 15:27–28; 2 Nephi 1:13). Commit to lay hold upon a life of personal purity that you may have the power to build an eternal family.

Learn by Study and by Faith

Finally, I encourage you to dedicate yourselves to a lifetime of learning in the light—to learn by study and by faith. The most important function of Brigham Young University is to provide you with an enlightened environment. I have heard some complain—primarily people outside the Church—that this campus does not provide enough choice. Since choice is made possible by opposites, the logical conclusion of their statement is that there is too much light at BYU and not enough darkness. They seem to suggest that we “search in the dark”—at least part of the time—to prepare for the “real” world. Last week’s events suggest that there is enough evil in the world without inviting it into our lives. Moreover, Mormon’s words suggest that the presence of evil is not necessary for one to make good choices.

The truth of the matter is that temptation can find a person anywhere. Satan’s work knows few boundaries. He has a long history of playing with the emotions and physical desires of young people. He will tempt you in your relationships, through television, movies, magazines, the Internet, and e-mail. He knows how to invade your apartments and homes. He will not forget you!

So, regardless of where you are, search in the light. It is better to search in the light of day assisted by knowledgeable friends than at night with Lucifer holding the flashlight. From my perspective, this campus is an enormous opportunity for young people to learn from the experience of others, to explore new ideas, to be supported by colleagues who desire only the best. It is a blessing to be surrounded by good people when making eternal decisions.

In the end, the opportunity to acquire spiritual knowledge at BYU will depend on your sensitivity to the Spirit. This type of learning cannot be forced. The Lord will determine the time and place. If you are diligent, new truths will enter your mind and heart, you will “feel pure intelligence flowing into you,” there will be “sudden strokes of ideas . . . presented unto your minds,” and you will have been taught by the Holy Spirit.⁷

Brothers and sisters, we have an opportunity to move to new levels—intellectually and spiritually—by heeding Mormon’s admonition. We are building an institution of infinite influence where one may search in the light and lay hold upon good things.

In light of the recent tragedy, the words of President Harold B. Lee seem appropriate. In a memorable devotional talk called “Have Faith in America,” given on 26 October 1973 at Ricks College, President Lee said: “Men may fail in this country, earthquakes may come, seas may heave beyond their bounds, there may be great drought, disaster, and hardship, but this nation, founded on principles laid down by men whom God raised up, will never fail. This is the cradle of humanity, where life on this earth began. . . . This is the place of the new Jerusalem. This is the place that the Lord said is favored above all other nations. . . . Yes, . . . men may fail, but this nation won’t fail.”⁸

May we be true to the Light and to the principles of freedom, justice, and mercy is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ John W. Welch and Doris R. Dant, *The Book of Mormon Paintings of Minerva Teichert* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 60.

² Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 252.

³ Gordon B. Hinckley, “Keep the Chain Unbroken,” *BYU 1999–2000 Speeches* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2000), 111.

⁴ Jeffrey R. Holland, *Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 6–7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17, 19.

⁷ Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 151.

⁸ Harold B. Lee, *Ye Are the Light of the World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 350–51; see also L. Brent Goates, *Harold B. Lee: Prophet and Seer* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 557–59.