



Some of the many Church leaders who have taught about setting priorities are (clockwise) Ezra Taft Benson, Harold B. Lee, Spencer W. Kimball, Marlin K. Jensen, Hartman Rector Jr., Russell M. Nelson, Neal A. Maxwell, Jeffrey R. Holland, Richard G. Scott, and M. Russell Ballard.

“Seek Ye First”: Prophetic Counsel for Establishing Priorities in Our Lives

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What is our most important priority in life? Is it our Church callings? Is it our spouse or children? Is it our occupation? Is it possible or even wise to rank these priorities? Frequently, our choices in life consist of simple distinctions between good and evil. At other times, they do not. Often, we find that decision making is actually fraught with perplexing choices between good and better, important and vital, or needful and essential. Perhaps such dilemmas are one of the very reasons we come to this mortal sphere—to experience the interplay among time, talents, and agency. Fortunately, latter-day prophets and seers give us ample guidance with these matters and even teach in clear terms not only what our specific priorities should be but also how we can establish and balance them in our lives.

After a Church Educational System (CES) fireside on February 5, 1999, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland gave additional counsel to CES faculty and guests who remained in the Assembly Hall on Temple Square. Among other things, he gave the following ranking of priorities we should seek to establish in our lives: (1) our physical and spiritual selves, (2) our spouses, (3) our children, (4) our Church callings, (5) our professional lives, and (6) our civic responsibilities. Elder Holland assured those assembled that this list is nothing new and that prior prophets have taught the same. In 1972, President Harold B. Lee counseled: “Most men do not set priorities to guide them in allocating their time and most men forget that *the first priority should be to maintain their own spiritual and physical strength*; then comes their family, then the Church and then their professions, and all need time.”¹

Our Spiritual Selves

Some might be perplexed to hear that our first priority is ourselves. How can this be, especially when we have been counseled about the importance of family, not to mention when the scriptures admonish us to “lose ourselves” for others? In 1994, President Howard W. Hunter gave this counsel: “*Your first obligation is to get your own spiritual life in order* through regular scripture study and daily prayer. . . . [You should also] secure and honor your priesthood and temple covenants.”² Similarly, President Ezra Taft Benson has counseled: “To be successful, we must have the Spirit of the Lord. We have been taught that the Spirit will not dwell in unclean tabernacles. Therefore, *one of our first priorities is to make sure our own personal lives are in order.*”³ As President Benson’s and President Hunter’s teachings imply, putting ourselves first is, in reality, placing God first, or at least our relationship to Him through regular scripture study, daily prayer, and so forth. Putting ourselves first is invoking our agency through obedience and inviting the companionship, guidance, and cleansing effects of the Holy Ghost, thus assuring that the power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ is operative in our lives.

We often say that family is our number one priority, which is true, in a manner of speaking. “Family first!” is more than a motto—it is a doctrinal declaration of one of our most sublime values. Yet, as Elder Holland and President Lee suggest, one thing actually is more important—our relationship with and obedience to God. Elder Russell M. Nelson puts into perspective the relationship between this first priority and the next two—namely, our spouse and children: “As we go through life, even through very rough waters, a father’s instinctive impulse to cling tightly to his wife or to his children may not be the best way to accomplish his objective. Instead, if he will lovingly cling to the Savior and the iron rod of the gospel, his family will want to cling to him and to the Savior.”⁴

This principle, properly applied, not only allows our loved ones to cling to and love us but also allows us to more fully love them. “Only when we love God above all others,” taught Elder Marlin K. Jensen, “will we be capable of offering pure, Christlike love to our companions for all eternity.”⁵

This placement of priorities should not be seen as a self-centered approach to living. Indeed, it is not. On the other hand, the Savior’s admonition that we lose ourselves for others must be properly understood: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take

up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 16:24–25). The Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew 16:26 gives us this clarifying detail: “And now for a man to take up his cross, is to deny himself all ungodliness, and every worldly lust, and keep my commandments.” To deny ourselves does not mean we do not take appropriate care of our spiritual and physical selves. The appropriate placing of these things first is, as was said before, putting God first. Losing ourselves is, in reality, relinquishing *selfishness* and becoming what God would have us be. Elder Neal A. Maxwell gives these clarifying insights:

Losing oneself means losing concern over getting credit; by knowing our true identity we need not be concerned about seeming anonymity. . . . Losing oneself means yielding the substance of one’s own agenda if it does not match the agenda of the Lord. . . . Losing oneself means keeping ourselves more spiritually intact . . . so that we are able to help more. . . . Losing ourselves means being willing to go to Nineveh when we would much prefer to go to Tarshish. . . . Losing oneself means losing one’s impulsiveness. . . . Losing ourselves means dropping our resistance to feedback so that we can grow faster, just as did meek and receptive Moses, the brother of Jared, Peter, and Joseph Smith.⁶

Furthermore, we are not to lose ourselves in the sense that we give no care *at all* to our physical needs. Proponents of this thinking, especially those who would discredit and diminish physical exercise, might zealously quote 1 Timothy 4:8, where Paul counsels, “For bodily exercise profiteth *little*: but godliness is profitable unto all things” (emphasis added). Lest we misunderstand this scripture, the footnote in the Latter-day Saint edition of the scriptures points out the Greek translation that renders the sentence this way: “Bodily exercise profiteth a *little* while” (emphasis added). This clarification bears out the principle that physical exercise is worthwhile, yet someday we will all be hindered by the aging process. If we can exercise, we should do so.

The Physical and Spiritual Self: A Divine Intermingling

To say that our spiritual self is our first priority is perhaps understandable, especially when we consider it as a function of placing God and His commandments first. Yet to some it might appear odd to elevate one’s physical well-being to the same level. Nevertheless, latter-day revelation declares unequivocally the importance “of things both temporal and spiritual” (1 Nephi 15:32) as regards the mortal soul. “The spirit *and* the body are the soul of man” (D&C 88:15; emphasis

added), and “spirit *and* element, *inseparably* connected, receive a fulness of joy; and when separated, man cannot receive a fulness of joy” (D&C 93:33–34; emphasis added; see also D&C 45:17; 138:50). Both body and spirit blend together. One who is strong spiritually understands the importance of keeping the body as strong and as healthy as possible in order to best serve God and man. It is difficult to give to others and serve them when we lack the health and vigor to do so. We are commanded to serve God not only with all our heart and mind but also with might and strength (see D&C 4:2; Moroni 10:32).

Physical discipline is a sign of being mentally clean. A person who would control and expand the spiritual self knows the importance of controlling the physical self as well. Latter-day prophets and leaders have attested to this doctrine. President Spencer W. Kimball declared, “The highest achievement of spirituality comes as we conquer the flesh.”⁷ President Harold B. Lee similarly taught that “except [a man or a woman] learns to sacrifice of his appetites and desires in obedience to the laws of the gospel [he or she] cannot be sanctified and made holy before the Lord.”⁸ Spiritual attainment is thus a function, in part, of physical mastery. Elder Hartman Rector Jr. offered this insight as to the relationship between body and spirit:

It is primarily the spirit that sees, hears, feels, knows passion and desire; it is the spirit that becomes addicted to drugs, bad habits, and evil desires. It is not just the physical body that is addicted, but the *spirit* also, which, of course, is the real you and me. We are spirits just as God is a spirit.

Sometimes we make excuses for ourselves, when we do what we should not do or fall short of what we should have done. We use such expressions as, “Oh! the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” With such rationalizations we insinuate that it is completely our physical body’s fault that we sin. In my opinion, this is not true. I believe the physical body is a very strong part of us and is of great benefit to us. Among other reasons, it was given to us to help us overcome our addictions, bad habits, and evil desires. The body is very obedient; generally speaking, it will do exactly what the spirit tells it to do. So it is not the physical body that we are struggling with; it is the spirit we must bring into subjection.⁹

The Dual Dimension of Discipleship

Obviously, we must be careful not to become too consumed with ourselves as we stress this first priority. We can focus so much on ourselves that we forget other important priorities. Personal conversion is an end in itself, but it is also a means to an end. In fact, ultimate con-

version and sanctification will not occur unless we realize the sobering fact that fully coming to Christ is dependent on helping others come to Him as well. This dual dimension of discipleship was eloquently taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith in his epistle on work for the deceased: “Their salvation is necessary and essential to our salvation; . . . they without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect” (D&C 128:15). The celestial kingdom will not be a place of spiritual seclusion where a person finally escapes the mortal burden of caring for others. “Service is not something we endure on this earth so we can earn the right to live in the celestial kingdom,” said President Marion G. Romney. “Service is the very fiber of which an exalted life in the celestial kingdom is made.”¹⁰

In essence, the twofold design of the gospel is to come unto Christ ourselves and to help others come unto Him. Doing so includes helping Church members, members of other faiths, and those who have died without having the opportunity to receive the fulness of the gospel. To Peter, the Lord tenderly but firmly taught the principle thus: “I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not: and *when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren*” (Luke 22:32; emphasis added). This dual dimension of our discipleship cannot be otherwise. The Psalmist declared: “*Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee*” (Psalm 51:10–13; emphasis added; see also D&C 11:21; Joshua 1:11–15).

We have been commanded to share the gospel and to be a leaven to the world. We are to serve others and to teach them the verities of eternity. To teach spiritual things effectively, we must first be spiritually effective ourselves. “Very little love can come from one who is not at peace with himself or herself and God,” said Elder Jensen. “No one can be concerned about the welfare of someone else and give love to another until he or she has taken care of his or her own soul.”¹¹ Once we are converted, once we are grounded spiritually, we can and should help others do the same.

A Word of Caution

We must be careful, though, not to adopt the false notion that we can let our spiritual lives deteriorate while we still maintain the ability to help others spiritually or that we can help others gain and develop testimonies of the truth while not having done so ourselves. President

Marion G. Romney taught that “spiritual guidance cannot come from the spiritually weak.”¹² The Apostle Paul warned, “Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself?” (Romans 2:21). To assume that we can seek the salvation of others while disregarding our own and that we will somehow receive an eternal reward for doing so is to err. The Book of Mormon chronicles the sad account of the seemingly helpful and promising Jaredite king Morianton, who nobly helped others but did not help himself: “And after that he had established himself king he did ease the burden of the people, by which he did gain favor in the eyes of the people, and they did anoint him to be their king. And *he did do justice unto the people*, but not unto himself because of his many whoredoms; wherefore *he was cut off from the presence of the Lord*” (Ether 10:10–11; emphasis added; see also Omni 1:1–2).

Interestingly, the converse is also true. Thus, focusing on *our* salvation while disregarding that of others will not be of any benefit. In fact, the two are so intricately interwoven that it is difficult to separate them. In other words, our devotions to God, to family, and to others are not mutually exclusive categories but are reinforcing and complementary duties. Elder John A. Widtsoe declared, “The Church is composed of homes. Church and home cannot be separated. Neither one comes first. They are one.”¹³

Proper Balance

Elder M. Russell Ballard has counseled, “If you . . . search your hearts and courageously assess the priorities in your life, you may discover, as I did, that you need a better balance among your priorities.”¹⁴ We must be careful not to make a mechanical and sequentially rigid list of personal priorities. To do so could be hazardous. “As always there must be balance,” said Elder Neal A. Maxwell. “The inordinate reading of the living scriptures that crowded out one’s family, one’s neighbors, and Christian service would be an error. One could become monastic though scholastic. Christian service to mankind could crowd out the living scriptures and become so consuming that one could forget his duties to family and to God, being a do-gooder almost as an escape from the family framework.”¹⁵

It is true that our families, although extremely important, are not our absolute highest priority. But this fact does not give us license to neglect or abuse them. Likewise, to nonchalantly say, “Well, my Church callings are priority number four, so I guess I can skip home teaching this month,” is not in the spirit of what the prophets have taught either, since our priorities all need time. Certain things do need to get done

at certain times in our lives. Additionally, we cannot simply force into our lives everything and anything that will possibly fit. Elder Holland captured this principle beautifully with the following analogy:

As a youth in England, Samuel Plimsoll was fascinated with watching ships load and unload their cargoes. He soon observed that, regardless of the cargo space available, each ship had its maximum capacity. If a ship exceeded its limit, it would likely sink at sea. In 1868 Plimsoll entered Parliament and passed a merchant shipping act that, among other things, called for making calculations of how much a ship could carry. As a result, lines were drawn on the hull of each ship in England. As the cargo was loaded, the freighter would sink lower and lower into the water. When the water level on the side of the ship reached the Plimsoll mark, the ship was considered loaded to capacity, regardless of how much space remained. As a result, British deaths at sea were greatly reduced.

Like ships, people have differing capacities at different times and even different days in their lives. In our relationships we need to establish our own Plimsoll marks and help identify them in the lives of those we love. Together we need to monitor the load levels and be helpful in shedding or at least readjusting some cargo if we see our sweetheart is sinking. Then, when the ship of love is stabilized, we can evaluate long-term what has to continue, what can be put off until another time, and what can be put off permanently. Friends, sweethearts, and spouses need to be able to monitor each other's stress and recognize the different tides and seasons of life. We owe it to each other to declare some limits and then help jettison some things if emotional health and the strength of loving relationships are at risk.¹⁶

Finding proper balance with our most important priorities is indeed challenging, especially when there are so many positive and worthwhile things we can do. Even vigorous pursuit of what we consider worthwhile objectives can be fraught with danger. "Perpetual devotion to what a man calls his business, is only to be sustained by perpetual neglect of many other things," said Robert Louis Stevenson. "And it is not by any means certain that a man's business is the most important thing he has to do."¹⁷ Just because we are doing good things, we should not automatically assume we have our priorities straight. "Ironically, inordinate attention, even to good things, can diminish our devotion to God," counseled Elder Maxwell. "For instance, one can be too caught up in sports and the forms of body worship we see among us. One can reverence nature and yet neglect nature's God. One can have an exclusionary regard for good music and similarly with a worthy profession. In such circumstances, the 'weightier matters' are often omitted (Matthew 23:23; see also 1 Corinthians 2:16). Only the

Highest One can fully guide us as to the highest good which you and I can do.”¹⁸

Similarly, Elder Richard G. Scott warned: “Are there so many fascinating, exciting things to do or so many challenges pressing down upon you that it is hard to keep focused on that which is essential? When things of the world crowd in, all too often the wrong things take highest priority. Then it is easy to forget the fundamental purpose of life. Satan has a powerful tool to use against good people. It is distraction. He would have good people fill life with ‘good things’ so there is no room for the essential ones. Have you unconsciously been caught in that trap?”¹⁹

There might even be times in life when we innocently or naively mistake less-important issues and activities as actually being vital. C. S. Lewis portrayed the dilemma thus: “There have been men before now who got so interested in proving the existence of God that they came to care nothing for God Himself . . . as if the good Lord had nothing to do but *exist!* There have been some who were so occupied in spreading Christianity that they never gave a thought to Christ. Man! Ye see it in small matters. Did ye never know a lover of books that with all his first editions and signed copies had lost the power to read them? Or an organiser of charities that had lost all love for the poor? It is the subtlest of all the snares.”²⁰ Illustratively, we can get so consumed with how we present the gospel that the content—the message itself—is blurred. Appearance and aesthetics, no matter how wonderful and appealing, must never be substituted for nor be mistaken with substance and significance.

Conclusion

As stated before, placing our spiritual and physical selves first is, in reality, placing God first. President Benson wisely counseled that “when we put God first, all other things fall into their proper place or drop out of our lives.”²¹ He also stated that “our love of the Lord will govern the claims for our affection, the demands on our time, the interests we pursue, and the order of our priorities.”²² What a promise! If we are struggling to prioritize, we should just put our first priority first! All the other priorities in our life will fall into place as they should. It is really that simple.

Yet at times we can unconsciously or even knowingly insist on making our pursuit for spirituality a complex and arduous undertaking. To some the thought of putting God first can appear burdensome. Occasionally, we hear this statement, supposedly made by the Savior and even regarded as scripture to some: “I never said it would be easy; I

only said it would be worth it.” Perhaps many comprehend the essence of this statement and even go so far as to mount it on their wall. However, two things are of note. First, the Savior, at least in scripture, never did say this. Second, as nice and as motivational as it might sound, this statement is not necessarily true. In fact, the opposite proves to be the scriptural declaration: “Take my yoke upon you. . . . My yoke *is easy*, and my burden is light,” said the Master (Matthew 11:29–30; emphasis added). Alma reminded his son Helaman that it is “*easy* to give heed to the word of Christ, which will point to you a straight course to eternal bliss” (Alma 37:44; emphasis added). Similarly, John extols that God’s “commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5:3).

These thoughts do not mitigate the fact that many people are striving with all their hearts to live the gospel and still might have deep pains and heavy burdens from life. Yet it is nonetheless true that putting God first in our lives is actually easier than anything we would do otherwise. Elder A. Theodore Tuttle reminded us of this principle when he explained that God’s commandments “are for our good, and when we violate them, we suffer spiritually, physically, and emotionally. Remember . . . it’s not nearly so hard to live the commandments as not to live them. The burden of keeping the commandments of the Lord is light compared to the burden of sin which we carry when we violate the commandments of God.”²³

We should all strive to do the will of the Lord and to feed ourselves spiritually, thus activating the power of the Atonement in our lives. Then, to the best of our ability, we should help our spouses, children, friends, and neighbors to do likewise. “The most important principle I can share,” Elder Scott declared, is to “anchor your life in Jesus Christ, your Redeemer. Make your Eternal Father and his Beloved Son the most important priority in your life—more important than life itself, more important than a beloved companion or children or anyone on earth. Make their will your central desire. Then all that you need for happiness will come to you.”²⁴ **RE**

Notes

1. Quoted in James E. Faust, “Happiness Is Having a Father Who Cares,” *Ensign*, January 1974, 23; emphasis added.

2. Howard W. Hunter, in Conference Report, October 1994, 69; emphasis added.

3. Ezra Taft Benson, *Come unto Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 92; emphasis added.

4. Russell M. Nelson, in Conference Report, October 2001, 84.

5. Marlin K. Jensen, "A Union of Love and Understanding," *Ensign*, October 1994, 49.
6. Neal A. Maxwell, *A Wonderful Flood of Light* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 99.
7. Spencer W. Kimball, "And the Lord Called His People Zion," *Ensign*, August 1984, 4.
8. Harold B. Lee, "For Every Child, His Spiritual and Cultural Heritage," *Children's Friend*, August 1943, 373.
9. Hartman Rector Jr., in Conference Report, October 1970, 73.
10. Marion G. Romney, "The Celestial Nature of Self-reliance," *Ensign*, November 1982, 93.
11. Jensen, "Union of Love," 49.
12. Romney, "Celestial Nature of Self-reliance," 93.
13. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 318.
14. M. Russell Ballard, in Conference Report, April 1987, 14–15.
15. Neal A. Maxwell, *Things As They Really Are* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 106.
16. Jeffrey R. Holland, "How Do I Love Thee?" in *Brigham Young University 1999–2000 Speeches*, 158–62.
17. Robert Louis Stevenson, "An Apology for Idlers."
18. Neal A. Maxwell, "Consecrate Thy Performance," *Ensign*, May 2002, 37.
19. Richard G. Scott, in Conference Report, April 2001, 6.
20. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 73–74; emphasis in original.
21. Ezra Taft Benson, "The Great Commandment—Love the Lord," *Ensign*, May 1988, 4.
22. Benson, "The Great Commandment," 4.
23. A. Theodore Tuttle, in Conference Report, October 1965, 32.
24. Richard G. Scott, "The Power of Correct Principles," *Ensign*, May 1993, 34.