

Raising the Greatest Generation of Missionaries

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It's wonderful to be here this morning, particularly with President Cecil O. Samuelson on the stand. He is a great man who will do great work here at Brigham Young University. And I would like to commend Sister Anne C. Pingree. She's just given my talk!

You need to know that I am a real fan of women of the Church, and I have very tender feelings for you. This is at least in part because of the influence of my dear wife, Barbara, who has taught me a lot of things during the last fifty-two years of our marriage. When you add to that the teaching of five daughters, two daughters-in law, and twenty-two granddaughters, there isn't much I don't know about women. And so, I consider myself to be an expert on the subject and in that sense pray that the Lord will bless me that I can share with you a thought or two as I have been asked to do.

Last year at the October general conference, I spoke to the brethren in priesthood meeting—I might just say that you are far more attractive than they were. The subject I spoke on was “raising the bar” or “raising the standard” of preparing our sons and daughters to be missionaries. Sister Bonnie D. Parkin and her counselors felt that you sisters may like to hear what I think you can do to help our youth to “rise up . . . measure up . . . and be fully prepared to

serve the Lord.” Because I feel so deeply about this subject and because I have an abiding conviction that you, the women of the Church, must have a vital, irreplaceable role in raising up the greatest generation of missionaries the Church has ever had, I am pleased to respond to their request.

President David O. McKay, in speaking to the subject of women’s influence and responsibility, said this: “By divine decree, the women in the Church are assigned the noble mission of being exemplars and leaders to mankind in the two most worthwhile accomplishments in mortal life. First, the development of character. That is done in the home principally. And second, the willingness and ability to render helpful service.”¹

One of the great scriptural stories of the Book of Mormon supports President McKay’s teaching that women, particularly mothers, have profound influence when it comes to developing character, building faith, and teaching children to render helpful service. I reminded the brethren in the priesthood meeting of the two thousand young men who fought valiantly against the much older and much more experienced Lamanite army. According to their leader, Helaman, “they . . . fought as if with the strength of God; . . . and with such mighty power did they fall upon the Lamanites, that they did frighten them; and for this cause did the Lamanites deliver themselves up as prisoners of war”(Alma 56:56).

These inexperienced young men were so spiritually and physically prepared and so powerful that they frightened their foes into surrendering. And although all of them were wounded in battle at one time or another, not one of them was killed (Alma 57:25).

Helaman recorded the reason that these young men had developed such incredible faith: “Yea, they had been taught by their *mothers*, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them. And they rehearsed unto me the words of their *mothers*, saying: We do not doubt our *mothers* knew it” (Alma 56:47–48; emphasis added).

Now, my dear sisters, you have a far greater influence as mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, teachers, and friends than you may realize. You have an irreplaceable and an unparalleled influence with our children and youth because you have such a natural propensity for the things of the Spirit. We are today fighting a battle that in many ways is more perilous and more fraught with danger than the battle between the Nephites and the Lamanites. Our enemy is cunning and resourceful. We fight against Lucifer, the father of all lies, the enemy of all that is good and right and holy. This contest is a battle, literally, for the souls of all mankind. We have, in recent days,

seen graphic, twenty-four-hour broadcasts about a regime that was evil, unforgiving, and relentless. The supreme enemy, however, is an adversary even more evil, unforgiving, and relentless. He is taking eternal prisoners at an alarming rate, and he shows no sign of letting up.

While the leaders of the Church are deeply and profoundly grateful for the many members of the Church who are doing great things in this battle for truth and right, I must honestly tell you that it still is not enough. We look to you, the women of Zion who have such a profound impact upon our sons and daughters, to help prepare them to serve in the greatest battle of all.

Today, we need young men and women who are ready, willing, and worthy to serve in defending and building the kingdom of God. We need young men and young women who have been prepared and taught by their parents, especially their mothers, to make and keep sacred covenants. What we need now is worthy, qualified, spiritually energized missionaries who, like Helaman's two thousand, are "exceedingly valiant for courage, and also for strength and activity" and who are "true at all times in whatsoever thing they [are] entrusted" (Alma 53:20).

I am convinced, sisters, that you are perhaps the single most significant key in bringing this to pass. Because of your nurturing nature, because you are positioned at the crossroads of our children's lives—day in and day out—because so much of what our children learn comes from your words and your actions, I appeal to you today to refocus and redouble your efforts in this marvelous cause. Our youth need to be taught by their mothers in clear, direct, specific terms the commandments of God. You can fill their hearts and minds with such strong faith in the Lord that they will not doubt. They, like the two thousand stripling warriors, need to be taught by their mothers to believe.

Some of you are probably wondering how in the world you can possibly do more than you are already doing. I don't know anyone who stretches herself further than a mother, or, for that matter, a grandmother or an aunt or a leader or a teacher who cares deeply about the future and well-being of the children she loves and serves. I'm sure all of you have days when you wonder how you will ever cover all the bases. You can't even imagine doing any more. Perhaps you will need to find more personal time to think, study, ponder, and pray. Every parent and teacher needs to find time to "be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). The ever-increasing demand for more and more activity outside of the home needs to be rethought. Parents need time to teach their children the gospel. The review and reallocation of more family time

would be a very good subject for your next family council.

Sisters, take a look at your life and at the lives of the children you love. Carefully evaluate whether or not there are things you can do differently—not necessarily in terms of quantity of time, I think you're all stretched to the limit on that, but in terms of quality of teaching and focus. Your attendance and participation in Relief Society can help you learn from each other how to prioritize your time.

I invite you to look at the children and youth over whom you have unusual influence, certainly those that are in your home and extended family. But include others as well: the young men and women you teach, or who live next door to you, or who are in your ward and stake. Sisters, please think about the influence you can have in helping them to understand the restored gospel, which will prepare them to serve as missionaries.

What we need more than anything else from mothers and fathers is to instill into the minds and hearts of their children an understanding of the restoration of the gospel with its doctrines and promised blessings. Last year we conducted a survey of the elders and sisters entering the Missionary Training Center. Far too many of them did not understand some of the basic doctrines and principles of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sisters, please help us teach our children the message and truths of the restoration of the gospel. They need to know about the apostasy after the time of Christ and His apostles. I know of no greater favor you can do for your sons or your daughters whom you send into the mission field than to help them and to arm them with their own sure testimony of the restoration of the gospel.

Help them to know that the Book of Mormon is another testament of Jesus Christ, and it is proof to the world that Joseph Smith is God's prophet of this, the dispensation of the fulness of times. Teach the youth of the majesty of the life and mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith. When you arm your sons and daughters with this knowledge, then they will enter the Missionary Training Center prepared to teach the message, and when they leave the Center, to teach the message of the restoration by the power of the Spirit.

Think about the words that described the sons of Helaman: *valiant, courage, strength, active, true*. Will you ponder and consider ways to teach those virtues to your children? We don't need spiritually weak and semicommitted young men or women in the mission field. We don't need missionaries to just take up space or fill a position; we need their whole hearts and souls.

We need vibrant, thinking, passionate missionaries who know how to listen to and respond to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit. This isn't a time, sisters, for spiritual weaklings. We cannot send our young adults on missions to be reactivated, reformed, or to receive a testimony. We just do not have the time or the luxury of doing that. We need our youth to be filled with "faith, hope, charity and love, with an eye single to the glory of God" (D&C 4:5). If you need to understand the Restoration better yourself, then what better subject could you study and discuss together in your family home evenings? Sisters, you can help us with this!

Are you teaching your children how to listen to the voice of the Spirit? Are you teaching them how to repent and why it is so crucial for them to be strictly obedient and to live completely on the Lord's side of the moral line? Are you helping your children learn about Christ and come to have faith in Him and His teachings? Are you teaching them to listen to our prophet and to follow what he has to say? Are you teaching them to fast and pray and to turn to Him for help when obstacles and challenges seem overwhelming to them? All of these principles and concepts are best taught in the home, in family home evening, and in the course of day-to-day living. They can then be reinforced through our youth programs, seminaries, institutes, and in other ways.

Sisters, begin right now, this very day, to help the children and youth that you love and with whom you have influence to be completely and fully worthy. Teach them how to keep their hearts, hands, and minds pure and unsullied from any kind of moral transgression. Teach them to avoid pornography as they would avoid the most insidious disease, for that is precisely what it is. Help them to stay away from the evils on the Internet. Help them to be honest and to be good citizens. Teach them never to defile their body in any way. And teach them that vulgar and filthy language is unbecoming and completely unacceptable for a bearer of the priesthood or for a young woman of God. Teach both your young men and young women to honor the priesthood as the power of God on earth and never to do anything that would preclude a young man from being worthy to hold that priesthood. Your daughters have enormous influence on our young men. Help them understand their role in this tremendously important endeavor. See that they dress modestly and project a wholesome image. They need to know that to wear provocative and revealing clothing is not pleasing to the Lord. Remind them that lasting beauty comes from within and is a reflection of faithfulness and purity of spirit.

There are few things as powerful as the influence of a righteous woman. How can our

young women be expected to grow up to be women of God unless they have role models to follow? How can we expect them to dress modestly, speak with clarity and beauty, learn the gospel, prepare for motherhood, and become women of God—unless you teach them how to do it? How can we expect them to keep themselves pure and encourage the young men in their lives to do likewise, unless you model purity and reinforce that there is no happier way to live? How can we possibly hope that our young men will grow in wisdom and stature unless you, their mothers and grandmothers and friends, show them how proud you are of them as they live worthy of holding the priesthood?

Teach our youth how to work and to find joy in working hard. Those who earn a good portion of the money for their mission bring to their service a depth of commitment that will bless them in finding, teaching, and baptizing the honest in heart.

Now these are high standards, and these are not small requests. I understand that, but I do not apologize for them. They reflect the Lord's standards for all young men to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood and for all young men and women to enter the temple, to serve as missionaries, and to become righteous husbands and wives and fathers and mothers. There is nothing new in them, nothing you haven't heard before. Help our youth rise up, measure up, and step up to be fully prepared to serve the Lord during this, the eleventh hour and the last time that the Lord has seen fit to call laborers into His vineyard (D&C 33:3).

Please understand, sisters, that the day of the "repent-and-go" missionary is over. The day of parents hoping to get their semiwayward son or daughter on a mission, expecting that somehow the mission president or a righteous companion will be able to work a miracle, is also over. I hope these words do not sound too strong or uncaring. I believe completely and totally in the sweet power of repentance to change the heart and life of anyone willing to undergo that process. But I also believe, from long and hard experience, that the mission field is not the place to initiate that process.

May I share, then, ten things all of us can teach our youth that will help them to be better prepared for a lifetime of service:

1. Understanding and accepting the Lord Jesus Christ, His atonement, and His love for each one of us.
2. Developing a meaningful prayer relationship with our Heavenly Father—real soul-searching, personal prayer both night and morning along with daily family prayer. This

begins at the mother and the father's knee.

3. Giving the Lord more time by studying the scriptures and gaining an in-depth understanding of the marvelous message of the restoration of the gospel through the Prophet Joseph Smith. Help them to be missionaries who match our glorious message.
4. Keeping the Sabbath day holy, which reflects the attitude, activities, and example of parents and adult leaders. Help stem the drift away from keeping the Sabbath day. We've got a problem with that, and you can help us.
5. Working and putting earnings in a savings account for a mission, which, of course, is best encouraged by parents in the home who make missionary work a priority.
6. Paying a full and honest tithe, which is underscored when parents take their children to tithing settlement and teach them from the time they are small to set aside 10 percent of all they earn and to do so joyfully.
7. Limiting the amount of time spent playing computer or electronic games. How many kills or baskets or points one can score in a minute with a computer game will have zero effect on children's ability to be a good missionary and may, in fact, dull their senses, emotions, and receptivity to the Spirit. Limit the time watching television, and go to movies, and watch videos. And beware—be fully aware of what our youth are watching on all kinds of media.
8. Accepting responsibility for decisions, mastering self-control and obedience to God's commandments. Teach them how to do that.
9. Learning not to waste time. Focus on things that matter most, such as how to serve and find joy in putting the happiness of others ahead of our own.
10. Recognizing the prompting of the Spirit. Seek the companionship of the Holy Ghost, especially in sharing the gospel and testimonies with others.

Sisters, it goes without saying that if we are “raising the bar” for our sons and daughters to serve as missionaries, that means we are in essence raising the bar for all of us as well. If we expect more of our youth, naturally we are also expecting more of their fathers, their mothers, and the others who directly influence their lives. Remember, Helaman's two thousand stripling warriors were faithful because “they had been taught to keep the commandments of God and to walk uprightly before him” (Alma 53:21). They had faith and did not doubt that God would deliver them, because their *mothers* had taught them (Alma 56:47–48). This instruction came to

them principally in their homes.

Now, I have one more suggestion. It is important for you to know that some parents feel they don't have the right to ask worthiness questions of their children. They think that is the purview of the bishop alone. Allow me to dispel that myth once and for all. Not only do you as mothers, along with your husbands as fathers, have the right to know the worthiness of your children, you have the responsibility. It is your duty to know how your children are doing with regard to their spiritual well-being and progression. You need to monitor carefully the issues and concerns they share with you. Ask specific questions of your children regarding their worthiness and refuse to settle for anything less than specific answers.

Sisters, do not slip into the mistaken idea that you just need to be a best friend or a pal. You need to be a mother or a Church leader who teaches God's commandments for His children and the expectations God has for His children. That means you will need to be firm yet loving in expecting your children and our youth to be obedient. There are far too many of our youth who are living by their own rules rather than the rules set by God.

I admire and respect you sisters more than I know how to completely express. You are crucial to the work as we seek to build the Lord's kingdom in these last days. I know that you are very familiar with a statement President Spencer W. Kimball made more than twenty years ago, but let me repeat it again in the context of what we have been discussing. "Much of the major growth that is coming to the Church in the last days," he prophesied, "will come because many of the good women of the world (in whom there is often such an inner sense of spirituality) will be drawn to the Church in large numbers. This will happen to the degree that the women of the Church reflect righteousness . . . in their lives and to the degree that the women of the Church are seen as distinct and different—in happy ways—from the women of the world."²

I couldn't agree more with President Kimball. Much of the major growth that is coming to the Church will come because of you—because you teach young men and young women to be ready, willing, and worthy to serve on missions, to know the gospel, and to go forward to teach it with power to the world. It will come because your own happy, righteous lives spill over into your children's lives as well as into the lives of others whom you will serve. It will come because your children develop respect for a woman of God with whom they've interacted personally. And it will come from your support of your husband and your Church leaders. It will come because your children see from your sterling example that the only way to be happy is to keep

the commandments of God and because they learn from you how to share the joy they feel with others. It is not possible for you not to have influence, my dear sisters. The only question is how far-reaching and how righteous your influence will be.

Let us never, ever forget that this work is all about people. And no one has more influence over boys and girls, young men and young women, men and women, and families than you do. Never, ever make the mistake of underestimating the influence you are in the Church and in the world.

President Gordon B. Hinckley, whom we all love, said this in setting the standard and the pace for all of us: “We have [so much] work to do, you and I Let us roll up our sleeves and get at it, with a new commitment, putting our trust in the Lord. . . . We can do better than we have ever done before.”³

My sisters, I have spoken plainly today. I hope that I have not offended any of you but rather that you can feel the love, the respect, the admiration, and the concern for you that emanates from the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and other Church leaders. We ask you now to join with us in the sacred work of taking the blessings of the restored gospel to the people of the earth. Each one of you is precious. Each one of you has a mission to perform in the battle for the souls of our Heavenly Father’s children. There is no power or influence in the Church greater than you are to solve the challenge that has been repeatedly pled for by President Hinckley when it comes to retaining in full fellowship those who join the Church. We ask that you lead out in your roles as auxiliary leaders, assisting the bishopric, assisting the full-time missionaries, and loving into full fellowship those who find the truth and come into the Church. Let your influence and love embrace them.

May God bless you with the vision to realize who you are and what the Lord has for you to do, and may we all “rise up . . . measure up . . . and be fully prepared to serve the Lord.” I testify that this work is true, and I leave with you, my beloved sisters, a blessing of peace upon you and your families, in the sacred name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

¹ David O. McKay, *Relief Society Magazine*, December 1956, 807.

² Spencer W. Kimball, “The Role of Righteous Women,” *Ensign*, November 1979, 103–4.

³ Gordon B. Hinckley, “We Have a Work to Do,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 88.