

The Light That Endures

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This address was given Friday, May 1, 2015 at the BYU Women's Conference

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I would like to share some thoughts today on the eternal value of things that don't keep. My brother and I recently spent a weekend cleaning out the basement of my parents' home of nearly 40 years. Their basement, like most basements, is a repository for things they seldom use and care for either very much or not at all. When we had separated the treasures from the dross, my brother and I began to pore over the things my mother has preserved over a half-century of marriage and motherhood. She is not a materialistic person, and so the scope and the depth of her archive surprised us. Her boxes hold photographs, picture frames, vases, greeting cards, the Christmas wish lists of her children, and countless books and Church talks on parenting, education, and faith. Her cluttered basement is a detailed testament to her love of her parents, her husband, her children, and the Lord.

Many of us are similarly devoted to physical objects we invest with sentimental and even spiritual value. I have learned from examining the things my mother has kept and treasured that these objects can indeed have great value—not for what they do, but for what *we* do *with them*. It's a reality that even objects we love and care for don't last forever. For example, no matter how carefully we curate a photographic record of our lives, none of us can take that record with us to the next life or even reliably pass it on to posterity. And yet every day we invest our time and talent and energy and faith into a hundred things that don't keep. The food we make disappears or spoils; rain falls on the car we wash; the crises at work and home we put to bed breed a thicket of fresh challenges. When we look around and don't see evidence of it, we may well ask, "Have I done any good in the world today?"¹ I think the answer is often *yes*, but the evidence is spiritual rather than physical. Even when the things we toil over are eaten, stained, spoiled, used up, worn out, or finally relegated to basement shelves, the light of our consecrated efforts continues to burn in the hearts of the people we love and serve.

The service we offer to those whom we love is a fulfillment of the covenant we make at baptism. The words from Mosiah are familiar to us:

“Behold, here are the waters of Mormon (for thus were they called) and now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light;

“Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life—

“Now I say unto you, if this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you?

“And now when the people had heard these words, they clapped their hands for joy, and exclaimed: This is the desire of our hearts.”²

This is also the desire of *our* hearts, and I have noticed how frequently the service Latter-day Saints extend to those who mourn or stand in need of comfort takes tangible forms. I have been blessed to see kindnesses extended to people I love: homemade meals, thoughtful cards, shoveled walks, or flower arrangements that dispel a haze of loneliness and pain. These signs of kindness vanish, but they leave something vital in their place. Long after the casserole has been eaten, the driveway is snowed over, and the flowers have wilted, the bonds of love between God’s covenant children remain. There is nothing magic or transcendent about a meal, or a handwritten card, or a quilt—until it has been infused with the love of someone who extends in faith the kindness Christ would offer to the weary or the brokenhearted. Things are only things until they become tokens of covenant hearts. Then, when we offer them to others, things that don’t keep can meet someone’s immediate needs, and the light of faith and love those offerings generate can burn forever.

It is a remarkable feature of Christ’s parable of the ten virgins that the wise virgins were those with *less* oil in their lamps than their foolish counterparts at the end of the story. Less oil, but more light. The parable, in Matthew, is as simple as it is profound:

“Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.

“And five of them were wise, and five were foolish.

“They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them:

“But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

“While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.

“And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.

“Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps.

“And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out.

“But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.

“And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut.

“Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.

“But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not.

“Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.”³

The foolish virgins, unprepared for the sudden appearance of the Bridegroom, run to buy oil for their lamps—but too late. When they finally stand at the door with lamps full of newly purchased oil, it turns out that a burning lamp, and not unused oil, qualifies one to join the Bridegroom. The oil of the wise virgins did not keep, but the light they created in *using* it illuminated their path to the Light that endures.

What does it mean, then, to be prepared to meet the Savior—to know Him when we see Him, and to feel He knows us? Christ, the Master Teacher, immediately follows this parable in Matthew with another that complements and further illuminates its message, placing greater emphasis on our charge to follow Him in blessing others. Taken together, these parables show the spiritual rewards that come from *combining* individual spiritual preparation with wise, illuminating, and enriching service. The second parable is one of inspired preparation and rich returns, and suggests what it is we are to *do* to realize the full value of things that don’t keep.

Here is the story: Before leaving on a long journey, a man entrusts his servants with amounts of money consistent with their various abilities. The servant who receives the most money—five talents—invests the talents and earns five more. The servant who receives two talents also invests his, at an identical rate of return. But a third servant receives only one talent, which he promptly hides in the ground. Understandably, he acts out of fear. What would his master say if the talent were lost? But in trying to keep the coin, the servant has rendered it worthless. The real value is not in coin that is kept but in talents that have been used, put to wise and fruitful purposes. When we use—rather than foolishly seek to save—the things of value in our lives, the Lord treats our offering as an investment, one He matches and transforms into something of enduring worth.

A few weeks ago, I attended the funeral of my first visiting teaching companion. I knew her only in the last decade of her life. Her husband had died a few years before I met her. For 33 years, she had suffered a painful and debilitating illness. Her health challenges notwithstanding, she was a legendary visiting teacher. She arranged all our appointments at the beginning of the month; all that was left to me was to pick her up and drive to the meetings. I saw the pain on her face as she struggled in and out of my car, but I saw in her commitment to those visits and our care for those sisters how much she valued her covenants to wear herself out in the Lord’s service.

One week she called to let me know the date she’d arranged for the month’s visit—a date that happened to be my birthday. I perceived this as a conflict; she suggested I perceive it as a gift. “It will be a happy birthday,” she said. “Because you’ll be serving someone.”

When I picked her up for our appointment, she was standing at the door with a homemade birthday cake perched on top of her walker. Her grandchildren who lived with her later told me they would often be awakened before six o’clock in the morning by a sound they called a “pan avalanche” as my companion tussled with the cookware she needed to do some good in the world. With a cake thus made on my birthday, she was prepared to transform our monthly visit into a party.

My companion's family knew that their untiring mother and grandmother would also want her funeral to be transformed into a meaningful service opportunity. And so, on tables outside the chapel doors, they arranged stacks of Books of Mormon inscribed with her testimony, intended as gifts for those who knew and loved her but were not members of the Church. The room was full of such people and others who had been blessed, lifted, and encouraged by a wise woman who bent every reserve of physical strength in her frail body to the task of bearing other people's burdens and comforting those who stood in need of comfort. Her grandchildren paid tribute to her life with the words of a song she loved: "I'm trying to love my neighbor; I'm learning to serve my friends. I watch for the day of gladness when Jesus will come again."⁴ She dedicated herself wholly, even recklessly, to this work, often pushing the limits of her physical capacity. But on the tables outside the chapel, and in the faces of her children and grandchildren inside, I saw evidence of the light of faith and testimony she generated and left behind as she spent her life in the service of others. The Savior magnified this light, and it will endure because of Him. It illuminated her path back to Him, and it will now help guide others to that day of gladness.

In many ways, my dedicated visiting teaching companion reminds me of my own wise mother. Among the papers I found in her basement were notes to and from her children that chronicle how, in ways large and small, she illuminated our days and nights. She made sacrifices to keep this flame alive, but always with a winning combination of humor and faith. I remember one example: a note she left on the kitchen counter when she accompanied my father on a Church assignment and left my teenage older sister and me alone. She always faithfully accepted these Church assignments, but the absence from home they required tugged at a mother's heart. Nevertheless, she served with grace, wit, and warmth. The note she left on the counter has an arrow at the top, pointing left toward a pile of crumpled \$1 bills and spare change, which she had obviously swept from her closet shelf. I could well believe that my mother, who rarely visited an ATM and almost never carried cash, spoke truthfully when she wrote below the arrow, "My entire life's savings I leave to my daughters Mary and Elizabeth. But it will do them no good unless they take these," and a second arrow pointed right, to a bottle of Centrum® vitamins. If we had some trouble procuring food with these meager funds, at least my sister and I had the vitamin pills to compensate and a mother's love to nourish us.

In fact, my mother left us a more enriching but less visible inheritance. If she required us to fend for ourselves occasionally, she spoiled us spiritually beyond my powers to appreciate. As a wise and vigilant mother, she had faith that the Lord would match her efforts. One of the papers I discovered in her basement records this expression of her testimony: "I am grateful that the Lord has answered our prayers in behalf of our children. I know that every blessing they receive comes from our Father in Heaven and His Son Jesus Christ. Because I know that, it is easy for me to feel gratitude. I know that the blessings they receive come from God after I have done all that I can for them. It is easy to feel grateful when I realize that Heavenly Father and the Savior are the source of those blessings."

It is easy for me to feel grateful for a mother who did all a loving parent could possibly do for her children and then exercised faith that the Lord would reward her precious investment. In some sense, the boxes in her basement—full of testimonies like these—contain receipts of the things she did not keep, the investments she made in faith and saw more than doubled by the

Lord. My mother is a frugal woman in every sense except for the extravagance with which she invests in oil: continuously filling and burning a lamp of testimony. I see the Lord accept and magnify her offering, transforming what could have been a tiny light into a veritable pillar of fire with which she illuminates a path home to Him. In this extravagance, she is wise and generous.

She used to read me a familiar Christmas story about newlyweds who each sold their most treasured possession—he, a watch, and she, her long hair—to buy a gift for the other. Alas! He sold the watch to buy combs for the vanished hair, and she sold her hair to buy a chain for the pawned watch. How apparently foolish; how truly wise. The story ends this way: “The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.”⁵

When my wise visiting teaching companion and my wise mother greet the Savior, they will be prepared to meet Him because they have become like Him. They have offered all they treasure out of love for Him. They have worn themselves out in His service. The 25th chapter of Matthew begins with the parable of the ten virgins, and then relates Christ’s parable of the talents, which I have shared. The chapter then closes with a glorious elucidation of what it means to be prepared, to be truly wise:

“When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

“And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

“And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

“Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

“For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

“Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

“Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

“When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

“Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

“And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”⁶

We spend our days toiling over a hundred things that don’t keep—like meat, and drink, and clothing. But when we offer food, clothing, time, compassion, friendship, or love to God’s children, the Lord magnifies our efforts and transforms the perishable into the eternal. A hundred small and fleeting kindnesses to others are eternally significant kindnesses to the Savior.

Elder Jeffrey Holland spoke eloquently of the real and lasting power of such charity: “I am grateful for *all* the women of the Church who in my life have been as strong as Mount Sinai and as compassionate as the Mount of Beatitudes. We smile sometimes about our sisters’ stories—you know, green Jell-O, quilts, and funeral potatoes. But my family has been the grateful recipient of each of those items at one time or another—and in one case, the quilt and the funeral potatoes on the same day. It was just a small quilt—tiny, really—to make my deceased baby brother’s journey back to his heavenly home as warm and comfortable as our Relief Society sisters wanted him to be. The food provided for our family after the service, voluntarily given without a single word from us, was gratefully received. Smile, if you will, about our traditions, but somehow the too-often unheralded women in this church are *always* there when hands hang down and knees are feeble. They seem to grasp instinctively the divinity in Christ’s declaration: ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these . . . , ye have done it unto me.’”⁷

I know the comfort and joy such service can bring to individuals and to families. In the boxes in the basement, I found mementos of a legacy of Christlike service handed down through generations of women in my family. My maternal grandmother’s compassionate service to children in her community with particular challenges left a lasting impression on my mother, who often described this service to me. Some of my earliest memories are of performing musical numbers and visiting with residents in assisted living centers. I had a sense even as a young child that these small and seemingly inconsequential activities were at the center of the life I wanted to live and the woman—like my mother and grandmother—I wanted to become. As they showed me the joy of service, these women taught me of the Savior.

On a scrap of paper that will not keep, my mother wrote this expression of faith, which surely will endure. She delivered it at a conference several years ago: “Mary, our youngest daughter, is in California today. Her plan is to be with my mother in church in Menlo Park. My mother is 95 years old. She is in a wheelchair, but she is in church every Sunday she can get there. My prayer is that she is there today with my daughter. My mother’s example of faith blesses my life, is blessing my daughter’s life, and will likely bless her posterity for generations to come. And the faith which takes her to meetings, even when it is so hard, fills her heart and mine with gratitude.”

I come from a line of women who save tokens and receipts of things invested in the Lord’s service, so it is not surprising that I do the same. Over 10 years and throughout moves that have taken me to both American coasts and across the Atlantic, I have carried a note that says, “Mary, You light up my life. Love, Mom.”

It’s almost miraculous that this slip of paper hasn’t been lost in one of my many moves, and I certainly don’t count on it surviving many more. But I will cherish its sentiment forever. If I am or have been a light in anyone’s life, it is because my mother led me toward the source of all light. I will be eternally grateful that she taught me through example that nothing has real or lasting value in this life except for the things we offer to the Savior in His service—and which he magnifies and transforms into things that endure. I hope, like the wise virgins of the parable, that I will be prepared to meet the Bridegroom with a diminished oil reserve wisely invested over a lifetime of illuminated discipleship.

I am grateful for the things in life we do not keep, but use and burn and invest in service to God's children and thus in service to the Savior himself. I have a testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He is the Light of the World. And I have a testimony that when we use all that we have and all that we cherish to fulfill the covenants we make at baptism, we prepare ourselves for a day of gladness, when we will meet the Savior and He will say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord." In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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1. "Have I Done Any Good?" *Hymns*, no. 223.
 2. Mosiah 18:8–11.
 3. Matthew 25:1–13.
 4. "I'm Trying to Be like Jesus," *Children's Songbook*, 78.
 5. O. Henry, "The Gift of the Magi," 1906.
 6. Matthew 25: 31–40.
 7. "Because of Your Faith," *Ensign*, November 2010.