

***“Ideals Are Stars to Steer By; They are Not a Stick to Beat Ourselves With”***  
Barbara Thompson

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“Ideals are stars to steer by: they are not a stick to beat ourselves with.” This is a quote by Sister Barbara B. Smith, tenth Relief Society general president. This wise counsel was recorded in an *Ensign* article in 1976.<sup>1</sup> Sister Smith was concerned that some women were judging themselves too critically. She hoped that women would always pursue excellence, but didn’t want women to condemn themselves when extremely high expectations weren’t met all at once.

Well, when I first read this quote, the first thing that came to my mind was a birthday card I received from a friend many years ago. It went something like this: On the front of the card there was a beautiful fairy with a magic wand. The caption said: “For your birthday, the birthday fairy will tap you on the head and you’ll become a beautiful princess.” Then I opened the card and there is a picture of a beaten-down woman, and the caption said, “Oh my, she must have beaten the tar out of you.”

There is a difference between a gentle tap on the head and being beaten. Often a gentle nudge or some kind advice is very helpful. But too often, either with ourselves or with others, we tend to beat the tar out of people. Have you ever heard that some people try to get rid of a pesky fly by shooting it with a shotgun?

Too often a sister will look all around her and see other women who seem to be so much better. Some women take the greatest virtues and abilities of others and compare them with their own faults, finding that almost everyone is better than they are. We frequently hear such things as, “My friend is a great cook, but I have trouble boiling water without burning down the house.” “The woman next door is dressed so fashionably, while I look rather frumpy.” “The Sunday school teacher knows her scriptures so well, and I have to sing the song I learned in Primary to find where 1 Timothy is in the New Testament.” “Her husband makes more money than mine, and they have life so much easier.” “Her children always get A’s on their report cards, and my children are cute but just get average grades.” “She has it all, and then there is me.”

The comparison list seems to go on and on. The result of making these comparisons is not that we become better, but more often we become bitter. It causes us to begin to believe that we can

never make it. We begin to believe that eternal life and happiness are something which we can never obtain. Oh, Satan loves it when we talk like this, and Heavenly Father is grieved when we talk like this. We are precious children of a loving Heavenly Father. I hope each of you knows that our Heavenly Father and our Savior love us with a pure and holy love. They love us unconditionally. They know us individually and what each one of us needs.

Really, the only person I need to be better than is the person I was yesterday. We are sometimes too busy comparing ourselves that we forget this.

Lately I have been reading many accounts of pioneer women, both in Nauvoo and in the early settlements of Utah. Reading diaries and journals of Latter-day Saint women gives me a much better perspective on life. I learn about the sacrifice, the faith, and the diligence of these good women. Many of these women were wonderful and strong. They had some challenges that are similar to our challenges today and some that were, of course, very different from our challenges.

One thing that I've noticed is that women always seem to work hard. I remember reading account after account that said such things as, "This morning I got up, got the fire started, baked ten loaves of bread, churned the butter, fed the animals, washed the clothes and hung them out to dry, and tidied up the house. Then it was time to get the children up for breakfast and off to school." I was exhausted just reading accounts like this, but these women did this work early in the morning, without a washing machine or clothes dryer or a modern mixer and oven for baking. This is just what they did. I didn't notice much in their journals that said anything about how fabulous all the other women were and they were much less by comparison. The women just didn't seem to have the time or the energy to spend time comparing themselves with others.

Today I want to discuss briefly the three questions mentioned in the introduction to this session. They are as follows:

1. How do we resist the tendency to beat ourselves up when we fall short?
2. How do we keep a healthy perspective on our weaknesses while striving for the eternal ideal?
3. In what ways can the Atonement help us live a happy life while in our imperfect state?

### **OK, Number 1: How do we resist the tendency to beat ourselves up when we fall short?**

Just a few weeks ago we had a marvelous general conference. During the talks, many things came to mind that I could do to improve myself and become a better disciple of Jesus Christ. I was enthusiastic about making changes. However, after I finished compiling my list, I had 27 major things I needed to do quickly in order to become a better person. In the days following conference, as I reflected on that long and wonderful list, I realized I would be a complete failure if I tried to give major attention to everything at once. As I looked back over the list, I began to prioritize my goals, giving greater attention to some, knowing that I could not do everything at once.

I considered on the theme of this conference, “By small and simple things are great things brought to pass.”<sup>2</sup> Then I began a process of working on my goals and striving to reach my ideals, one or two at a time. Actually, I sometimes try to throw in an easy goal here or there so I will have something I can do quickly and cross off my list. This seems to encourage me and give me some sense of accomplishment!

If I were really to beat myself up each time I fell short, I truly would be bruised from head to toe. Instead, I need to realize that generally, most good things come “line upon line, precept upon precept.”<sup>3</sup>

Some goals are definitely more important than others and need more attention. Christ made this abundantly clear when He spoke to the people who were gathered to receive His wise counsel. He was displeased with the scribes and Pharisees who made a big deal out of some of the smaller matters but completely ignored the weightier matters of the law. Here is what Christ said as it is recorded in Matthew 23:23: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”

Christ continued His teaching by saying in verse 24: “Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.”

Christ felt that judgment, or in other words, justice, mercy and faith, were clearly the weightier matters that needed priority. This is a good standard for us to use in prioritizing our lives.

We seek good judgment or justice in all our dealings. We have been commanded to “judge righteously.” In Alma 41:14 we read, “Therefore, my son, see that you are merciful unto your brethren; deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually; and if ye do all these things then shall ye receive your reward; yea, ye shall have mercy restored unto you again; ye shall have justice restored unto you again; ye shall have a righteous judgment restored unto you again; and ye shall have good rewarded unto you again.”

In Doctrine and Covenants 11:12 we read, “And now, verily, verily, I say unto thee, put your trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good—yea, to do justly, to walk humbly, to judge righteously; and this is my Spirit.”

Good judgment and justice in our dealings helps us to truly become Christians. We won’t criticize nor find fault, either with ourselves or with others. We will be more willing to forgive ourselves and others. This simple act of forgiveness brings a sense of joy and happiness.

For me, mercy is a loving and kind word. Mercy is showing compassion or being forgiving. Again, this is a quality that Christ wanted us to obtain. It is one of the weightier matters of the law. I am sure each of us wants to be judged in a merciful way. We should also extend that mercy to ourselves and to others.

The Old Testament stresses how important it is to be merciful. In Proverbs 3:3 we learn, “Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart.” This scripture suggests that we should have mercy as part of our very being. It should be a way of life. In Matthew 5:7 we read, “Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.”

Another weightier matter is faith. As noted in the Bible Dictionary, “Faith is to hope for things which are not seen, but which are true (Heb. 11:1; Alma 32:21) and must be centered in Jesus Christ in order to produce salvation.... Faith is a principle of action and of power . . . by faith one obtains a remission of sins and eventually can stand in the presence of God.... Where there is true faith there are miracles, visions, dreams, healings, and all the gifts of God that he gives to his saints.”<sup>4</sup>

Remember the tiny mustard seed? It is “the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is among the greatest of herbs, and becometh a tree.”<sup>5</sup> The Lord Jesus Christ taught that, “If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.”<sup>6</sup>

By following the weightier matters of the law—judgment, mercy and faith—we will learn how to prioritize our lives because we will be paying attention to the things that matter most. This will help us resist the temptation to be too hard on ourselves.

## **OK, Number 2: How do we keep a healthy perspective on our weaknesses while striving for the eternal ideal?**

When there is a difference of opinion, I have often said that “everyone has a right to my opinion.” Further, when things go wrong, as they sometimes will, I have made the statement: “I did not say it was your fault; I said I am going to blame you!” Obviously, I make these statements facetiously, knowing that if these were my true beliefs, they would make it very difficult for me to have a healthy perspective on my own weaknesses.

We are all familiar with the scripture found in Ether 12:27: “And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.”

This is one of the best guides I have found to help put a healthy perspective on our weaknesses while striving for the eternal ideal.

The Doctrine and Covenants reminds us that it is our duty “to expound scriptures, and to exhort the church.”<sup>7</sup> This revelation was given through the Prophet Joseph Smith to his wife, Emma, but the Lord made it clear that “this is my voice unto all.”<sup>8</sup> Emma taught the sisters in the early Relief Society meetings to be charitable, to be kind, and to follow the prophet.

Her successor, Eliza R. Snow, also expounded the scriptures and exhorted the Church. Eliza was given the charge by President Brigham Young to go throughout Utah and teach the women what it means to be a woman in the kingdom of God. She taught the gospel, the plan of salvation, and helped the various wards to organize their own Relief Societies.

Sometimes women felt discouraged or challenged as they would strive to live righteously and teach their children. They did endure many hardships and difficulties. Eliza R. Snow gave this wonderful counsel in May 1869, she said: “Tell the sisters to go forth and discharge their duties, in humility and faithfulness and the Spirit of God will rest upon them.... Let them seek for wisdom instead of power and they will have all the power they have the wisdom to exercise!!!”<sup>9</sup>

Later in Ogden, Utah, in the tabernacle, Eliza addressed the sisters on August 14, 1873. Her wise counsel then still rings true for us today. She said, “To be sure we have trials; but what are they? I want to ask my sisters now a serious question. When you are filled with the Spirit of God, and the Holy Ghost rests upon you—that Comforter which Jesus promised and which takes of the things of God and gives them to us, and shows us things to come, and brings all things to our remembrance—when you are filled with this spirit, do you have any trials? I do not think you do. For that satisfies and fills up every longing of the human heart and fills up every vacuum. When I am filled with that spirit my soul is satisfied; and I can say in good earnest, that the trifling things of the day do not seem to stand in my way at all. But just let me lose my hold of that spirit and power of the Gospel, and partake of the spirit of the world, in the slightest degree, and trouble comes; there is something wrong. I am tried; and what will comfort me? You cannot impart comfort to me that will satisfy the immortal mind, but that which comes from the fountain above. And is it not our privilege to so live that we can have this constantly flowing into our souls?”<sup>10</sup>

Again, while instructing the sisters, Eliza called upon her niece, Emily Richards, to stand and speak to a body of sisters. Fear overcame young Emily Richards and she could not say anything. Aunt Eliza said kindly, “Never mind, but when you are asked to speak again, try to have something to say.”<sup>11</sup> Emily Richards turned her weakness into strength when it was reported that she later spoke at an annual convention of the National Woman Suffrage Association held in Washington, DC. She was described as being “self-possessed, dignified, and as pure and sweet as an angel. . . . It was not the words themselves but the gentle spirit [that] went with the words and carried winning grace to every heart.”<sup>12</sup>

This is how we change our weaknesses into strengths, by using the Holy Spirit to guide and direct our paths. Having the Holy Spirit with us strengthens us in our trials and weaknesses, helps us to put things in their proper perspective, and helps us learn how we can obtain the eternal life we seek.

**Now Number 3: In what ways can the Atonement help us live a happy life while in our imperfect state?**

The Atonement is the greatest event in the history of the world. There is nothing that was more important to the children of God. The Atonement gives me hope. This is sometimes the only thing that keeps me going because I know of the reality of the Atonement. It means that I can repent. I can have another chance at keeping the covenants I have made. I can go forward knowing that I can continue to progress in my quest to qualify for eternal life.

I remember some time ago when I was struggling. Things didn't seem to be going particularly well in my life. I was still dealing with the death of my mother. Work was very difficult, and I was going through big changes in my employment. My church calling was challenging, and I felt I could never accomplish the things that needed to be done in order to magnify my calling. I was generally discouraged. I decided a vacation was what I needed. I traveled to the home of my sister in Virginia.

One evening I stayed up late, basically feeling sorry for myself. I was reading in the scriptures and came across a few verses that seemed to jump off the page at me. These were the words I read from Revelation 3:19-22: "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.

"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

"To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

These verses were exactly what I needed to hear. Rather than feeling sorry for myself and how badly things were going in my life, I needed to repent, humble myself, and come unto Christ. I needed to invite Him into my life much more than I had been doing. I needed to remember the words of the sacrament prayers and more fully live by those things I had promised to do.

Here are some of the things stated in the sacramental prayers:

1. We eat in remembrance of the body and blood of the Savior.
2. We witness we are willing to take upon us the name of the Son and always remember Him.
3. We signify that we are willing to keep His commandments.
4. Then we can expect that we will have His Spirit to be with us.<sup>13</sup>

President Boyd K. Packer stated, "Nowhere are the generosity and the kindness and mercy of God more manifest than in repentance. Do you understand the consummate cleansing power of the Atonement made by the Son of God, our Savior, our Redeemer? He said, 'I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent.' In that supernal act of love, the Savior paid the penalties for our sins so that we might not have to pay."<sup>14</sup>

In an inspiring general conference address, President James E. Faust said, “The Atonement and the Resurrection accomplish many things. The Atonement cleanses us of sin on condition of our repentance. Repentance is the condition on which mercy is extended. After all we can do to pay the uttermost farthing and make right our wrongs, the Savior’s grace is activated in our lives through the Atonement, which purifies us and can perfect us.”<sup>15</sup>

One of my favorite sermons in the Book of Mormon is the sermon of King Benjamin to his people as he was preparing to turn over the leadership of the kingdom to his son, Mosiah. He called the people together to the temple, and they sat with their tent doors facing the temple. King Benjamin taught the people about faith, repentance, and baptism, about the value of hard work, and the blessing of serving others.

He taught them that Christ, our Savior, would come and would suffer temptations, pain, hunger, thirst, fatigue, “even more than man can suffer.”<sup>16</sup> He taught them that Christ is our Redeemer and His was the only name by which salvation is possible.<sup>17</sup>

The people listened carefully and were filled with the Holy Spirit as King Benjamin taught them. Then they “cried aloud with one voice, saying, O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified; for we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”<sup>18</sup> As a result, “they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ.”<sup>19</sup>

This is true joy and happiness, receiving a remission of our sins and having peace of conscience. This is how we can be happy while in this imperfect state. This feeling of peace and happiness will enable us to continue striving to improve and reach our righteous goals as outlined in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We will be encouraged to strive for excellence. By our small and simple efforts and actions, great things will be brought to pass. We will have greater power to receive personal revelation, which will enable us as we strive to increase our faith and our personal righteousness, strengthen our families and homes, and encourage us to seek out and care for those in need. By doing these things, our goal of eternal life will be within our reach.

I testify that our Heavenly Father and our Savior Jesus Christ live and love us dearly. I testify that we can enjoy the blessings of eternal life as we keep our covenants. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara B. Smith, “A Conversation with Sister Barbara B. Smith, Relief Society General President,” *Ensign*, Mar 1976, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Alma 37:6

<sup>3</sup> See D&C 98:12

<sup>4</sup> Footnote, Bible Dictionary, pages 669-670.

<sup>5</sup> See Matthew 13:32

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 17:20

<sup>7</sup> See D&C 25:7

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<sup>8</sup> See D&C 25:16

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Eliza R. Snow to Mary Elizabeth Lightner, May 27, 1869, Church History Library.

<sup>10</sup> Footnote Jill M. Derr Historical Manuscript, August 14, 1873, p. 374.

<sup>11</sup> *Women of Covenant*, Derr, Cannon, Beecher, p. 93.

<sup>12</sup> *Women of Covenant*, Derr, Cannon, Beecher, p. 93.

<sup>13</sup> See D&C 20:77,79

<sup>14</sup> Boyd K. Packer, “Cleansing the Inner Vessel,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 74–77.

<sup>15</sup> James E. Faust, “The Atonement: Our Greatest Hope,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2001, 18.

<sup>16</sup> See Mosiah 3:7

<sup>17</sup> See Mosiah 3:16, 17

<sup>18</sup> See Mosiah 4:2

<sup>19</sup> See Mosiah 4:3