

“Things Which Matter Most Must Never Be at the Mercy of Things Which Matter Least”
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Before I begin with my talk, I would like to express my gratitude to you for being here today. I cannot help being overcome by a feeling of love when I see a group of righteous women such as you meet together to learn, to seek understanding, to seek ways to improve ourselves to be better daughters of our Heavenly Father, and I know you’re doing just that today. I hope that you’re having fun, that you’re having the Spirit with you as you have met new friends and as you have enjoyed the messages in the sessions that you have attended. And I hope that as we conclude our session today with Elder and Sister Bednar, that you will go home and ponder about the things that you have listened to and that the Spirit has personally taught you during the last two days. I will try to do the same myself.

In the New Testament, we are introduced to a family of devoted disciples of Christ who lived in Bethany, a small town a short distance from Jerusalem. We know of three members of that household: Martha, Mary and Lazarus. In Luke chapter 10 we read that as a friend and honored guest, Jesus Christ goes to pay them a visit. On this occasion, Lazarus is not mentioned, and we only find Martha and Mary visiting with Jesus. We assume that Martha is the oldest of the three siblings and the head of the household because we read that “Martha received him into her house” (Luke 10:38). In verse 39 it is implied that initially both sisters sat at Jesus’ feet to hear his words. However, as the head of household, Martha felt the weight of responsibility for the comfort and attention given to her guest, and must have left to attend to what she felt Christ’s needs would be. She became “cumbered about much serving” during Jesus’ visit, while her sister Mary chose to remain listening to the Lord, and did not help her with any preparations.

This is where we must make a distinction. Martha was fulfilling her responsibility as a hostess, which was a valid and kind thing to do. She expected her sister Mary to assist her. And when this was not happening, in frustration she went to the Lord and asked him: “Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me” (v. 40). “And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (vv 41–42).

When we read the words “much serving” and “cumbered about many things,” we must ask ourselves: Was Martha overdoing what could have been a simple meal? Was her attention to Christ’s temporal needs taking time away from moments she could have spent learning at His feet? It is clear that she was a faithful disciple, with a strong testimony of His divinity, as we can tell by her declaration: “I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world” (John 11:27). She certainly understood how important His teachings were, so why was she not taking full advantage of this opportunity to learn from him? Of course the answer must be she felt pulled in many directions: show respect and love for her honored guest, manage her household responsibilities, and listen to the Lord’s words. It was a full plate for any woman, and one to which each one of us can relate.

Every day we are required to make many choices, some of which are easier to make than others. Our day is packed with a myriad of possibilities from the moment we wake up in the morning until the moment when we go to bed at night. Coping with these complex and diverse demands that surround us daily is a challenge for each of us. We all strive to maintain a balanced life of peace, harmony and happiness, but we can often feel overwhelmed. Demands from work, school, family, church, and civic responsibilities press for our time and cause us to feel pulled in many directions. We become frustrated over our inability to manage our time, energy and resources successfully. It is a constant tug-of-war between rewarding and demanding, or satisfying but stressful. Can peace, harmony and happiness be found in a world that seems to pull us in so many directions at the same time?

We can and must learn to make wise choices about the use of our time and resources. Of paramount importance is having realistic expectations and realigning our priorities along with gospel lines. Goethe said: “Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least.” How do we know what things matter most? Why is it important that we learn how to make wise decisions? How do we make right the choices? What are the consequences of the choices we make daily? And how do we choose between two or more good things?

To answer these questions, we must consider the eternal significance of agency and how the choices we make on a daily basis affect the course of our life. The purpose of our mortal life is to gain exaltation. We are exalted in family relationships. The plan of redemption was designed to accomplish this purpose. Heavenly Father’s work and glory is to bring to pass the eternal life and exaltation of His children (Moses 1:39). And as part of His plan for us, we are given commandments, we are given agency, and we are given the gift of the Holy Ghost, all of which are instrumental in helping us gain exaltation.

Agency is the ability to choose and act for ourselves. It is a gift from God, and it is one of the most basic and most important laws of the gospel. The right to choose is an eternal principle. We are free to choose our course of action, but we cannot choose the consequences of our actions because consequences are a natural result of the choices we make. Elder Dallin H. Oaks said: “Our life’s purpose to obtain experience... would be frustrated if our Heavenly Father directed us in every act, even in every important act. We must make decisions and experience the consequences in order to develop self-reliance and faith” (“Revelation,” in *Speeches*, 29 September 1981).

Making righteous choices puts us on the path toward eternal exaltation, even if we get buffeted by life's winds. Our choices in this life will likewise determine our course in the eternities. Thus, our power to choose should be treasured above any earthly possession. If we use our agency wisely, it allows us to keep all of our choices open and improves our ability to make the right decisions in the future. Some choices are more important than others. Some choices have greater consequences than others. Some choices are relevant while others are trivial. Some choices are between two or more good things, while others are between good and bad. But regardless of the kind of choice we have before us, there is a consequence attached to that choice. Many of the choices we make determine to a large extent our peace, our happiness and our overall well-being, or our unrest, unhappiness and distress.

Think of the choices you have made so far today. Which of those choices you have made was irrelevant? Which of the choices you made today was the most important? And which was the most long lasting, far-reaching?

While making correct choices 100 percent of the time is not possible, when we follow gospel priorities it becomes easier to make the right choice even between several good things.

How do we set our priorities in the proper order? And how do we soften our hearts to desire the priorities that we know are most important? Consider the words of the Savior to His disciples: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

We need to realize that seeking to have an eternal family is actually synonymous with seeking the kingdom of God. Had you ever thought about that? Bringing up children in light and truth (D&C 93:40), increasing faith and personal righteousness, strengthening families and homes, and helping those in need is indeed seeking the kingdom of God.

If you agree with me that our highest priority should be to seek first the kingdom of God, it becomes essential for us to make choices that will help us gain exaltation. Our highest priority must be the work of our own salvation, followed by the salvation of our families.

Think back to the original example of Mary and Martha. It was clear that Martha loved Jesus and wanted to provide careful and loving service to him. This was an admirable thing, a good choice. However, it was *more* valuable to receive lessons from the Lord's own mouth, a distinction which she must have realized when the Lord defended Mary's choice. We must also consider the value of our own activities. Are we choosing to clean the house because our visiting teachers are coming over rather than doing a puzzle with our begging child? Are we spending an hour or more at the gym every day but can never find time for scripture study or family prayer? Where must our priorities be? We must look at the activities and actions that fill our lives, and decide if individually they are leading us further toward God or doing nothing for us. Are these things we choose to do helping us fulfill our baptismal and temple covenants? When we fully understand that the purpose of our mortal existence is to gain exaltation, building and strengthening loving

family relationships naturally becomes a top priority. This firm understanding will guide the many choices we must make.

Like God, our families are the most important things in our lives. In the family we experience the greatest joys and the deepest sorrows. These joys and sorrows affect everything else we do at work, at school, at play.

Building an eternal family is an eternal quest which requires our full commitment. We must commit to do what is necessary to strengthen it in love, unity and with faithful obedience to the commandments. The seemingly small choices we face daily have eternal consequences because they put us on a certain path. In a conference address, Elder Boyd K. Packer said: "Our lives are made up of thousands of everyday choices. Over the years these little choices will be bundled together and show clearly what we value" ("The Choice," *Ensign*, Nov. 1980). I certainly believe this to be true. Each of the small things that we do push us slightly in one direction or another.

Think of the small choices you face daily that affect your marriage. My eternal marriage occupies a position of high priority in my life, and many times I have had to forgo or postpone something that I would like to do in order to maintain a peaceful and harmonious relationship. It might be as simple as changing plans or rearranging schedules, or as complicated and difficult as choosing to be patient and forgiving when we really disagree on something. I also make sure that I spend time with my husband doing things that we both enjoy, such as walking daily and traveling together when we can. These are important things, and your spouse should feel that you value him enough to make nurturing your relationship a priority. Weekly date nights are a wonderful goal, as is attending the temple together at least monthly. Doing these things will help you keep balance in your relationship and provide a stability and happiness that will trickle down to all the other areas of your life.

I would like to give you a personal example of prioritizing involving temple attendance. Early in our marriage we moved to Central America, and for the next 14 years the closest temple was the Mesa, Arizona temple. Because of this, our trips to the temple were once or twice a year at best. Later we moved to Chile, where the Santiago temple was dedicated. Now we had a temple close by, but we also had eight children! We decided as a couple that we would try to go to the temple frequently, with our goal to go weekly. My husband's work required him to do extensive travel, so Friday was our best chance to go to the temple together. I still remember how difficult it was for me to arrange everything so we that could enjoy the blessings of temple attendance. It wasn't easy, and we didn't make it every week, but our determination helped us to go frequently. Our children learned that going to the temple was a high priority in our lives, and we were benefitted as a couple with increased closeness and guidance from the Spirit about raising our large family.

If you have children at home as well, are you so busy providing what you think are opportunities for them that you neglect things that truly do nurture family relationships? Are dance, sports, music, or art lessons getting in the way of family prayers, family scripture study, or enjoying family meals together? Are your choices of how you spend your time and resources affecting your spiritual progress? We need to weigh our choices against our priorities, and be intentional in

including time and activities that bind our families and that are essential for our spiritual growth. In the honesty of our souls, we need to really think about whether we are trying to rear successful children in today's society, or righteous children. Sometimes these two things may not lead to the choice of the same daily activities.

Research has actually shown that the strongest predictor of a child's academic achievement and of low behavioral problems is the amount of time families spend together. However, with an increase in our financial security, many of us choose to provide ever more extracurricular activities outside the home for our children. The result is a decrease in the amount of time families have together and a decline in the frequency of family meals. We should all reconsider the value of such a simple thing as eating together and sharing the events of the day.

When we give up family time for other seemingly worthwhile opportunities for our children or for ourselves, we are letting things that matter most be at the mercy of things which matter least. When we find ourselves with no time for prayer or scripture study, it might be time to evaluate and increase our efforts to prioritize. Is the way we use our time truly a reflection of what we value most? Are our choices aligned with our priorities?

President Harold B. Lee said: "The most important...work that you will ever do will be...within the walls of your own home" (Strengthening the Home, pamphlet, 1973, p.7). This underscores the importance of nurturing and strengthening our families. We must remember that when we schedule the essential first, we will find time for the necessary and maybe nice to do, but when we schedule the nice to do first, we might not have enough time to do the essential.

For those of you whose children are grown and have their own families, or for our single sisters, what does strengthening families look like? Is it still a high priority? Or is it a priority at all?

Heavenly Father's plan of happiness is eternal and is for all His children. Qualification for exaltation comes only through obedience to the commandments and by receiving the necessary ordinances. All of us can fulfill the majority of those while on earth. Of course marriage is generally one of the first priorities, but not everyone will have that opportunity in this life. I know that this is a very painful and difficult trial to bear if you are earnestly seeking marriage and keeping yourself worthy of it. If you continue to remain single, you will be happiest if you concentrate your efforts and your focus on other worthy priorities, while at the same time maintaining your personal faith and testimony. Remember that the Lord is blessing you with extra time to serve in His kingdom in ways that many others are unable to. While it may seem small comfort, the Lord blesses many lives through the dedication of single sisters. You can also choose to strengthen friendships and extended family relationships. Remember that we are all children of God, and we can serve and love those around us and develop the attributes that will bless us when we have our own eternal families. This is a gift that our Heavenly Father promises every worthy woman and man, in His timetable.

In addition, we have other important priorities. We have responsibilities that come with Church callings, with employment or education, and service to others. How do we choose to maintain balance between family, work and Church? Three scriptures come to mind.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 says: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.”

In Mosiah 4:27, King Benjamin counsels: “And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength. And again, it is expedient that he should be diligent...”

And then in D&C 58:27–28, the Lord says: “Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; for the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves.”

These three scriptures illustrate that although actively following our priorities is certainly important, Heavenly Father knows that we are not perfect. Sometimes our priorities shift and blur, depending on the demands on our time. There have been many times in my life when my highest priority has taken first place when choosing what to do, and that same priority has taken second place on a different occasion.

Serving a full-time mission has been one of those shifting priorities. When I was young and the opportunity to serve a full-time mission presented itself, I chose to serve a mission over going to school. Later, I chose going to school over working full time, which would have given me more income to buy nice things. And later in life, after my husband retired, we chose to serve another mission together over enjoying the leisure of retirement. All of these things were good things, but during those seasons of my life I was led to choose one over another.

Another example has been my testimony of visiting teaching. I feel very strongly about my assignment as a visiting teacher. I see it as an opportunity to minister, to help and befriend other sisters. It has always been a high priority in my life. What has changed for me is how. When I had unresolved scheduling conflicts with my assigned companion, visiting our sisters occupied first place over going with my assigned companion. Thus, many times I have gone alone. Although preparing and discussing the monthly message is important to me, there have been times when my sisters needed a different kind of a message or even an act of service. On occasion, I have had the intention of taking homemade cookies or a treat when visiting, but for some reason or another I haven't found the time to bake. I have had to choose to make the visit to our sisters anyway and leave the cookies or treat for another day. What really mattered was that I was available to feel the Spirit and convey the love of God to my sisters. My visiting teaching experiences have more clearly taught me what is essential, what is necessary and what is nice to do in ministering.

Throughout my life I have had many opportunities to host General Authorities in my home, and like Martha, I have felt the responsibility to provide meals and comfort to our guests. I was also “cumbered about much serving,” and “careful and troubled over many things,” maybe at the expense of the “needful.” I am still in the process of learning and reminding myself what all those “needful” things are, but I realize that balance, peace and happiness are results of following gospel-aligned priorities. Personal spirituality and family ties should always be first. Continually

reminding myself of this has enabled me to make better use of my time and resources, which in turn has given me peace and satisfaction. I have tried to prevent spending my discretionary time on ineffective activities that yield little spiritual substance. I have learned that how well we love, treat and support each other within the family determines my truest happiness.

Always remember that there is really a time and a season for all things. The Lord doesn't expect us to run faster than we have strength, but He wants us to be diligent, and to always be engaged in a good cause. I know that agency and the right to choose are divine gifts that we have to learn to use correctly in order to gain eternal life and exaltation. Some of those choices are hard to make, but if we put them in the proper perspective, always seeking first the kingdom of God, the things that matter most for us will never be at the mercy of things which matter least. Strive to have your small daily choices show clearly what you truly value. I have a testimony that these things are true, and I pray that each of you will pray for the Lord's guidance in discerning which of life's choices will bring you the most lasting happiness. I know the gospel of Jesus Christ is true. I know that Jesus Christ is our Savior and our Redeemer. I know that God lives, that He loves each one of us because we are His children, and that He has given us the gift of the Holy Ghost to guide us, lead us and direct us in the choices we make that will have eternal consequences. And of this I testify to you in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.