

Happiness, Deceit, and Small Things

BRIAN K. ASHTON

Brothers and sisters, it is a privilege to be with you this morning. Both Melinda and I graduated from BYU, and we love coming back.

I prepared this talk with my children and my missionaries in mind. I would like to talk with each of you from my heart as if you were one of my children or my missionaries.

Would you please take a moment to think about what you want in the future? I suspect that many things might enter your mind. Some of them might be quite short term: getting a date for the weekend, doing well on finals or your end-of-term paper, or finding transportation home for Christmas. Other desires might include longer-term dreams: having a happy marriage and family, getting into graduate school, obtaining a good job, achieving financial success, living in a certain location, or buying a new car. Whatever your hopes and dreams are for the future, I suspect that you want those things because you believe they will bring you happiness. Ultimately, happiness is what we all desire.

When I was a student at BYU, I thought a lot about my future. I suspect you think a lot about yours as well. Once I got to the future—meaning life after BYU—I learned three critical lessons that made a big difference in my life. I want to share these lessons with you with the hope that you don't take as long as I did to learn them. They are lessons that can help you find greater joy in

life—and ultimately obtain exaltation with your Heavenly Father.

Lesson One: True Happiness Comes from Having the Spirit in Our Lives

Lesson number one begins with a story.

I met my wife, Melinda, during my sophomore year at BYU, about six months after I had returned from my mission. I knew immediately that Melinda was the woman I wanted to marry. Melinda, however, did not have the same experience. It wasn't until five years later that she finally received an answer that it would be "okay" if she married me.

During those five years—actually nearly five-and-a-half years, if you include our engagement—I had one of the more difficult trials of my life. I really wanted to be married. I knew whom I was supposed to marry, and the Spirit urged me on, but I couldn't seem to reach that goal. Nothing I did seemed to help our relationship move forward as quickly as I wanted. It was five-plus years of frustration and—more important—refinement for me.

Brian K. Ashton, second counselor in the Sunday School general presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on December 5, 2017.

Shortly after I had graduated from BYU, Melinda decided to go on a mission—in part, I am convinced, to get away from me. I was concerned that while she served in Spain, my misery would increase as I waited for her. And there were times when I was miserable because I focused on what I didn't have and I failed to exercise faith in God's promises. However, I was studying the scriptures and praying daily, serving in the Church, and striving to do those things that brought the Holy Ghost into my life.

One early, very cold Sunday morning in Minneapolis, while I was driving to a church meeting, I thought, "I should be really miserable right now. Nothing seems to be going the way I want. But I'm not miserable. I feel unbelievably happy!"

There were actually a lot of moments of joy and happiness for me while Melinda was on her mission. I missed her, but I also remember that time as one of general happiness. My life wasn't perfect—and it still isn't—but for the most part I was happy.

Now how could I be happy if I was going through what, for me, was a very difficult trial? The answer is found in Galatians 5:22–23. It reads: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance."

This scripture teaches at least two great truths: One, when we feel the Spirit in our lives, which can refer to the Holy Ghost or the Light of Christ,¹ we feel love, joy, and peace. It is those feelings that make us truly happy. And two, the Spirit is the source, or the fount, from which these blessings or fruits come.

Consequently, because I was doing the things that brought the Spirit into my life, even amid what, for me, was a lot of turmoil and frustration, I felt God's love. I felt joy and peace. I could suffer long and still be happy.

So lesson number one is that if we want to feel love, joy, and peace, we must do the things that bring the Spirit into our lives. Another way to say this is that having love, joy, and peace in our lives, our families, and our marriages does not come

from having a big house, nice cars, the latest clothing, career success, or any of the other things that the world says bring happiness. In fact, because feelings of love, joy, and peace come from the Spirit, feeling them doesn't have to be connected to our temporal circumstances at all. Thus even in our most difficult circumstances it is possible to be happy.² This is one reason why, only hours before His Atonement and all the difficulties that would come with that experience for the Savior and His disciples, Jesus could tell His apostles to "be of good cheer."³

Please understand that I am not saying that we will always be happy or that our temporal circumstances never affect our happiness. In fact, if we do not taste the bitter, we cannot know the sweet.⁴ We need to struggle at times. Furthermore, there are some physical and emotional conditions, such as clinical depression, that can cause us great suffering and make it very difficult for us to feel the Spirit. But if we are striving to have the Spirit in our lives and are trusting God, we can, in general, be happy.

I testify from personal experience that this is true. Since my experience while Melinda was on her mission, I have noticed that if I am doing the things that bring the Spirit into my life, including choosing to believe and accepting that things will work out as God intends⁵—and that is critically important—I am usually happy.

To summarize, lesson one is that true happiness comes from having the Spirit in our lives and cultivating an eternal perspective, and thus happiness is not dependent upon our circumstances.

Lesson Two: Satan Tries to Deceive Us with Counterfeits That Can Never Bring Lasting Happiness

Lesson number two is that Satan offers counterfeit alternatives to all that God does in an attempt to confuse and deceive us. But despite Satan's attempts to convince us otherwise, the Savior teaches us that "a corrupt tree [cannot] bring forth good fruit."⁶ Since Satan is a corrupt tree, he cannot cause us to feel "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, [and]

temperance.”⁷ Rather, Satan wants to make us miserable.⁸

So what does Satan do? He tries to deceive us. In fact, Heavenly Father has warned us that Satan’s objective is “to *deceive* and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will.”⁹

Now Satan has been trying to deceive people for a long time. And the fact is, he is very good at it. The Savior Himself told us that this would be so. Speaking of our day, Jesus told His disciples in Jerusalem, “For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive *the very elect*.”¹⁰

Let me share the story of a friend of mine, one of the elect, who was deceived. My friend served a mission and was an outstanding missionary. When she came home from her mission, she intended to do all the little things that had brought the Spirit into her life and had strengthened her on her mission. And for a time she did. However, she saw friends, many of whom were returned missionaries, come to church each Sunday but outside of church live as the world lives. They seemed happy. They were doing “fun” things. And their lifestyle didn’t seem to require as much work as hers did.

Slowly she stopped doing the little things that had brought her spiritual strength on her mission. She still had a testimony, but she told me that she had concluded, “If I was just attending my church meetings, I was okay—I was on track.” Nevertheless, she told me, “Spiritually I was inactive.”¹¹ As she lived as the world lives, one bad choice led to another, and soon she was pregnant.

Of course, as happens with each of us, her unrighteous choices eventually caught up with her. She wasn’t happy, and she knew it. Fortunately, my friend recognized that she had been deceived, and she repented.

She said:

Obviously I hit rock bottom. I knew that if I wanted a good life and to be truly happy, I would have to be completely honest with myself and recognize that I needed help. . . . I knew that God knew all my sins, and

*I came clean to Him. I told [God], “I’m sorry. I know I [messed up]. I’m turning back. I’m willing now.”*¹²

I am happy to report that my friend’s broken heart and contrite spirit helped her get through a long and difficult, yet merciful, repentance process. Today my friend is happy, is striving to keep the commandments, and is physically *and* spiritually active in the gospel.

Her story highlights that even the best of us can be deceived and become confused about the source of true happiness. Furthermore, her story points out that we must constantly guard against being deceived by doing the little things that bring the Spirit into our lives.

Satan’s deceptions come in many ways. I will only mention a few here.

Satan tries to convince us to prioritize temporal things over spiritual things. For example, we may begin to think that succeeding in school or earning a living—both good things—are the most important tasks in our lives right now. And because these tasks take a lot of effort and time, we may do them to the exclusion of truly important spiritual things.

Now, we do need to have balance in our lives. We do have to pay attention to temporal things. But sometimes we forget to exercise faith that God will help us do necessary spiritual and temporal things. We can tell if our priorities are out of place by noticing how often we say, “I’m just too busy or too tired right now to . . .” and then fill in the blank—attend the temple, do my home or visiting teaching, study and ponder the scriptures, fulfill my calling, or even say my prayers.

One reason we feel so busy is that Satan works hard to make sure we often feel distracted. He uses the smartphone in our hand, the radio in our car, the televisions in our home, and a myriad of other things to keep us distracted almost all the time. As a result, we feel busier than we actually are.

Another result of this distraction is that we are pondering less and less. Satan works to distract us because he knows that pondering, especially the scriptures, leads to greater conversion and

revelation. It also helps us to put the activities of our lives in proper perspective and to prioritize correctly. What is more, it helps us internalize the principles that allow us to work through trials and doubts with faith. Most of us would do well to take more time to quietly sit and ponder.

Another of Satan's deceptions comes through the idea that our outward actions matter more than our inward motivations. Too often keeping the commandments becomes something that we do because it is on our checklist or because we want others to think that we are righteous instead of our keeping the commandments being a way to worship God, partake of the divine nature, and become more like Jesus Christ and Heavenly Father. This was part of my friend's problem. She was physically active at church, but because she cared more about what others thought of her rather than about worshipping God, she lacked real intent and her heart wasn't open to allowing the influence of the Holy Ghost to change who she was inside.

When we lack the proper motivations for doing spiritual things, we fail to experience the joy of the gospel. As a result, keeping the commandments starts to feel like drudgery, and Satan knows that if he can get us to feel this way, we are likely to stop doing what we know we should. Now it is never okay to not keep the commandments. When we lack the proper motivation, we need to continue to keep the commandments and pray with real intent to change our hearts.

Satan also deceives us into believing that joy and happiness come from having an easy life or from simply having fun all the time. They do not. The truth is that there is no joy or happiness without something to overcome.¹³ The happiest people I know are those who have challenges in their lives and are striving to overcome them. Because of their challenges, they rely upon God, and in so doing they feel His help and love in their lives. Some of the most miserable people I know do everything they can to avoid challenges. I am not saying that we want to manage our lives in such a way that we are overwhelmed all the time, but for some of us, Satan too often convinces us to take

the easy way, telling us that happiness comes from pleasure and ease. More often, we would be much happier taking the path of hard work, relying upon the Savior, and getting out of our comfort zones.

The last of Satan's deceptions that I will mention is that he tries to convince us that wickedness, with its temporary pleasures, really is happiness. Satan knows that, at least in the moment, certain feelings or emotions may (1) make us think we are feeling the fruits of the Spirit, (2) feel like acceptable substitutes, or (3) mask our desire for those fruits. As Satan causes us to feel these emotions, we can become confused about what we really want.

For example, Satan gives us lust in place of love. He gives us excitement instead of joy. He gives us distraction rather than peace. He gives us self-righteousness, zealotry, and political correctness in lieu of goodness. And in this confusion we may begin to think that breaking the commandments will bring happiness.

Here is one way some of the elect are confused about what really brings happiness. In *For the Strength of Youth*, the prophets have taught the following about sexual purity:

*Never do anything that could lead to sexual transgression. . . . Before marriage, do not participate in passionate kissing, lie on top of another person, or touch the private, sacred parts of another person's body, with or without clothing. Do not do anything else that arouses sexual feelings.*¹⁴

Yet too many young adults, who at baptism and in the temple made sacred covenants to be obedient to the commandments of God, find themselves looking at pornography, making out, or doing other things that arouse improper sexual feelings. Why? Because some have become confused, believing, even if just momentarily, that lust will make them happy. It cannot. At a minimum, these sins cause us to lose the Spirit, deny the faith, and fear.¹⁵ And unless we repent, we will eventually find that we are very unhappy, and we will leave a trail of carnage of lost and stolen virtue.

So to summarize lesson two: Satan cannot produce the same feelings as the Spirit can. Consequently, Satan tries to deceive us with counterfeits that can never bring lasting happiness,¹⁶ and even the elect can be deceived if they are not careful.¹⁷

Lesson Three: Doing the Small Things Brings the Spirit, Protects Us from Deception, and Leads Us to Eternal Life

Lesson number three is that it is usually little things that bring the Spirit into our lives, keep us from being deceived, and ultimately help us obtain the strength to keep the commandments and gain eternal life. The Savior taught this principle to the elders of the Church in Kirtland, Ohio, in Doctrine and Covenants 64:33: “Wherefore, be not weary in well-doing, for ye are laying the foundation of a great work. And out of small things proceedeth that which is great.” One meaning of this scripture is that the small things we do, such as studying and pondering the scriptures and praying daily, create the foundation upon which we obtain eternal life.

Why are the small things so important? In the verse following the one we have just read, the Savior explained that “the Lord requireth the heart and a willing mind.”¹⁸ Why did the Savior link doing small things with the heart and a willing mind? Because in consistently doing the small things, we yield our hearts and minds to God—maybe even more than by doing big things. Yielding our hearts to God causes us to

*wax stronger and stronger in . . . humility, and firmer and firmer in the faith of Christ, unto the filling [of our] souls with joy and consolation, yea, even to the purifying and the sanctification of [our] hearts.*¹⁹

This purification and sanctification changes our very nature, little by little, so that we become more and more like the Savior. This also causes us to be more receptive to the promptings of the Holy Ghost, which makes us less likely to be deceived. And it is those who “have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide [who] have not been deceived.”²⁰

In other words, doing the small things changes our hearts. And when our hearts are turned to Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, we can be both physically *and* spiritually active in the gospel.

Let me share with you one small thing that has made all the difference in my life.

In my senior year of high school, my dad taught me seminary in our home. Since the topic of study that year was the Book of Mormon, my dad decided that we would read it together, verse by verse, and discuss what we learned. As we read, my dad would ask me questions that got me thinking about what we were reading, and he would explain things I didn’t understand. I still remember reading Jacob 5 and discovering for the first time the Lamanites and the Nephites among the branches that had been hidden in the nethermost parts of the vineyard.²¹ I remember learning about the Savior and sensing that He really did visit the Nephites and that I really could be forgiven of my sins because of His Atonement.

I trace my foundation in the scriptures to those sessions my dad and I had together. As I mentioned, I felt something as we read. And maybe more important, I noticed that my desires, motivations, and actions changed. I wanted to be better. I began to see where I was being deceived. I repented more often.

After my senior year of high school, I continued to try to read the scriptures daily. That summer and into the fall I wasn’t as consistent as I should have been, but by the end of my freshman year of college, I was reading the scriptures every day.

At about this time, President Ezra Taft Benson asked the members of the Church to read the Book of Mormon and apply what they learned daily.²² So in addition to whatever else I was reading, I read at least something from the Book of Mormon.

On my mission I learned how to really study and feast upon the scriptures. I learned to study with a question in mind. I found similar phrases and terminology in different parts of the scriptures and began to connect them in ways that enhanced my understanding of the doctrine.

I slowed down so that I could ponder and pray about what I was reading. I learned to study topically and sequentially. Not only did I feel the Holy Ghost as I read, but I also started to feel joy as I searched the scriptures to find answers to my own problems and those of my investigators. Best of all, my testimony of and my desire to follow Jesus Christ increased.

After my mission I continued to feast upon the scriptures daily. Because this practice invited the Holy Ghost into my life, I was more efficient. I was guided as to how to manage my time. I had inspiration come to me about how to solve problems that were often totally unrelated to what I was studying. I received help in identifying the highest priorities for the day. As a result, I did better in school and, later, at work. It was easier to make good decisions. I prayed more and was more diligent in fulfilling my callings. Feasting upon the scriptures daily didn't solve all my problems, but life was easier because I was in the scriptures.

In August 2005, President Gordon B. Hinckley issued a challenge to the members of the Church to read or reread the Book of Mormon before the end of the year.²³ Since I was reading from the Book of Mormon daily anyway, I was already reading in Ether or Moroni when the prophet issued this invitation. Consequently, upon finishing the Book of Mormon a week or two later, I concluded that I had completed President Hinckley's challenge.

But then a faithful home teacher came to visit our family. He asked how I was doing with President Hinckley's invitation.

I told him that I had the good fortune of having started the Book of Mormon before President Hinckley's challenge and finishing it after he had issued it. Then, with some self-righteousness, I announced that I had completed the task.

Fortunately my home teacher saw things differently. As he gently corrected me, the Spirit whispered to me that he was right.

Because I was still reading at least one chapter a day in the Book of Mormon, I had already restarted it. However, I realized that I was going to have to read two chapters a day to finish the

Book of Mormon again by the end of the year—in addition to any other studying that I was doing. As I increased how much I read in the Book of Mormon, I noticed that even more power came into my life. I had more joy. I saw things more clearly. I repented even more frequently. I wanted to minister to and rescue others. I was less susceptible to Satan's deceptions and temptations. I loved the Savior more.

That November I was called to be the bishop of our ward. Completing President Hinckley's challenge prepared me for that calling. Since then I have noticed that the busier I have become either at work or at church, the more I need to be in the scriptures, especially the Book of Mormon.

You can have the same blessings and power in your life if you too will feast upon the scriptures daily, including the Book of Mormon. Nephi explained this promise to his brothers in 1 Nephi 15:24:

And I said unto them that [the iron rod] was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction.

What Nephi described in this verse is a covenant. Our part of the covenant is (1) to hearken unto the word of God, which includes the scriptures, and (2) to hold fast unto it. How do we hold fast to the word of God? By studying it daily. As we then apply what we learn in our lives, we bind God to fulfill His part of the covenant. His part is (1) to ensure that we never perish and (2) to help us not be deceived by the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary that cause so many to be blinded and led away to destruction.

I promise that if you will feast upon the scriptures daily, especially the Book of Mormon, you will invite the Spirit into your life and you will naturally pray daily, repent more often, and find it easier to attend church and partake of the sacrament weekly. You see, when we feast on the scriptures, we invite the Spirit of the Lord into

our lives,²⁴ and when we feel the Lord’s Spirit, we want to do these other “small” things.

Last April, during general conference, President Thomas S. Monson made a similar promise. He said:

*My dear associates in the work of the Lord, I implore each of us to prayerfully study and ponder the Book of Mormon each day. As we do so, we will be in a position to hear the voice of the Spirit, to resist temptation, to overcome doubt and fear, and to receive heaven’s help in our lives. I so testify with all my heart in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.*²⁵

I implore each of you to feast upon the words of Christ in the Book of Mormon daily.

To summarize lesson three: it is usually the small things that bring the Spirit into our lives, keep us from being deceived, and give us the power to obtain eternal life. This is one reason the Savior told His apostles in the New Testament, “He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.”²⁶

A Wonderful Future

Brothers and sisters, the future can be wonderful! But to make it so, please learn the three lessons discussed today. As a reminder, these lessons are:

1. True happiness comes from having the Spirit in our lives and cultivating an eternal perspective, and thus happiness is not dependent upon our circumstances.
2. Satan cannot produce the same good feelings as the Spirit can, so he tries to deceive us with counterfeit feelings and ideas that can never make us happy.
3. Doing the small things consistently, like praying and studying the scriptures daily, brings the Spirit into our lives, keeps us from being deceived, and gives us the strength to obtain eternal life.

I testify that as you do the small things and trust the Lord, you can find love, joy, peace, and

happiness, regardless of your circumstances. I also testify that this is made possible because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. All good things come because of Him.²⁷ He lives. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. “The Spirit” as used in Galatians 5:22–23 clearly refers to the Holy Ghost. But it also refers to the Light of Christ. Since all of God’s children have the Light of Christ, all people are able to feel the fruits of the Spirit when they do good things, even if the Holy Ghost is not present. We feel these fruits when the Light of Christ, which is within us, cleaves unto truth and light (see D&C 88:40). In other words, the Light of Christ is attracted to the things that are inspired by God (see Moroni 7:13). When this attraction occurs, one feels the “swelling motions” that Alma described in Alma 32, which are so delicious (Alma 32:28). Thus anyone who does good, whether he or she enjoys the gift of the Holy Ghost or not, can feel the fruits of the Spirit. However, without the gift of the Holy Ghost, one cannot enjoy these feelings constantly. In addition, they may not be felt as intensely.

2. See Mosiah 24:15.

3. John 16:33.

4. See D&C 29:39; see also Moses 6:55.

5. See Jacob 3:2. When we are firm in the faith of Christ, we can feast upon God’s love no matter our circumstances.

6. 3 Nephi 14:18.

7. Galatians 5:22–23.

8. See 2 Nephi 2:27.

9. Moses 4:4; emphasis added.

10. Matthew 24:24; emphasis added.

11. Interview notes and transcript in the author’s possession.

12. Interview notes and transcript in the author’s possession.

13. See 2 Nephi 2:11, 23.

14. *For the Strength of Youth* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 36.

15. See D&C 64:16.

16. See Alma 41:10.

17. See Matthew 24:24.
18. D&C 64:34.
19. Helaman 3:35.
20. D&C 45:57.
21. See Jacob 5:25, 40.
22. See Ezra Taft Benson, “A Sacred Responsibility,” *Ensign*, May 1986; also Benson, “The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion,” *Ensign*, November 1986.
23. See Gordon B. Hinckley, “First Presidency Message: A Testimony Vibrant and True,” *Ensign*, August 2005.
24. See D&C 18:34–36; 88:66.
25. Thomas S. Monson, “The Power of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, May 2017.
26. Luke 16:10.
27. See Moroni 7:22, 24.