

# *The Parable of the Cherry Tree: How to Enjoy the Constant Companionship of the Holy Ghost*

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Years ago I took a botany class here at BYU. The professor described a problem that sometimes occurs with sweet cherry trees. Apparently, there are times when they look fully mature, are beautifully shaped, and have complete foliage, but they don't bear fruit. As I remember (and I ask the life sciences students here to be patient with me as I describe this in lay terms), he said that there are times when the sugar that sets fruit does not stay in the branches but goes to the roots instead. If this has occurred, then it may be necessary to "shock" the tree by upsetting the cambium layer in the tree trunk so that the sugar will stay in the top of the tree and set fruit.

We students asked how one does this. The professor told us we could carefully cut into the bark with a knife or we could shoot the tree with a small-caliber firearm. (Apparently, years ago some farmers did this.) Or we could beat the bark with a baseball bat. He said if we did beat the bark with a bat, we should do it after dark so our neighbors wouldn't see us.

Well, I decided to try shocking the tree because I had a seven-year-old sweet cherry tree that would not bear fruit. So I got out my bat, waited until dark, and "carefully" tapped the bark around the base of the tree—then waited for the results. And results I got. The

leaves began to wilt, turn yellow and then brown, and finally fall to the ground. I had completely girdled the tree, which totally cut off the branches from the roots. The tree died.

My purpose is not to illustrate that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing—though in my case it was. Rather, my purpose is to illustrate the devastation that results when branches are cut off from their roots. When this occurs, nourishment cannot flow from the roots to the branches. Similarly, if we cut ourselves off from the Holy Ghost, our source of spiritual nourishment, we experience spiritual devastation.

The Savior taught:

*I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.*

*If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. [John 15:5–6; see also 1 Nephi 15:15 and Alma 16:17]*

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I want to consider my experience with the cherry tree as a parable representing the Savior’s teachings about the true vine. When we maintain our relationship with the Holy Ghost, we are blessed with the flow of influence and direction that can nourish our spirits and bring them life. To do this I will respond to two questions:

1. Why do we need the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost?
2. How can we enjoy the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost?

### **Why Do We Need the Constant Companionship of the Holy Ghost?**

Unquestionably, life is full of difficult choices. You students need the direction of the Spirit as much or more now than at any other time in your life. You are making so many critical, life-determining decisions. Think of some of these: what to major in; how to balance school, work, and church responsibilities and a social life; whom to date; how to get a date; whom to marry; when to marry; and what to do about a job or career—especially in a difficult economy. You have some difficult choices to make and need help. The Holy Ghost can assist you in making these choices—that is, if you do not allow circumstance to “shock” you into losing your connection.

Elder Richard G. Scott recently taught us, “Therefore, we are led to seek personal inspiration in life’s important decisions. . . . That assistance will come to you through the Holy Ghost as spiritual guidance” (“To Acquire Spiritual Guidance,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 6).

In Moroni we are given this promise: “And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things” (Moroni 10:5). From the book of John we learn these important truths: the Holy Ghost “will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13) and “shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance” (John 14:26).

In this most recent general conference, Sister Julie B. Beck, Relief Society general president, said, “The ability to qualify for, receive, and act on personal revelation is the single most important skill that can be acquired in this life.” Furthermore, she said, through personal revelation we “can prioritize correctly and navigate this life confidently,” “prevail over opposition and persist in faith through difficult days and essential routine tasks,” and understand “what to do every day to increase faith and personal righteousness, strengthen families and homes, and seek those who need our help” (“And upon the Handmaids in Those Days Will I Pour Out My Spirit,” *Ensign*, May 2010, 11).

I bear testimony that for these and many other reasons, it is absolutely necessary to have the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. We must keep our connections open and strong.

### **How Can We Enjoy the Constant Companionship of the Holy Ghost?**

Of the many things we’ve been taught through scriptures and by the counsel of our Church leaders, I want to speak about four. These are not new (see President Thomas S. Monson, “Be Your Best Self,” *Ensign*, May 2009, 67–70; Marion G. Romney, “Guidance of the Holy Spirit,” BYU devotional address, 20 March 1979). These four things have been taught since the organization of the Church. They are among the small and simple things written in the scriptures. But remember—out of small and simple things, great things are brought to pass (see Alma 37:6–7; D&C 64:33). Strong connections and open channels can be maintained in simple ways. They are

1. Pray in faith continually.
2. Search the scriptures daily.
3. Keep the commandments always.
4. Serve others willingly.

**Number One: Pray in Faith Continually**

In Alma 34:20 we are invited to “cry unto him when ye are in your fields, yea, over all your flocks” (see also Alma 34:17–27). Thinking of fields and flocks reminds me of an experience I had recently while attending a sacrament meeting in a BYU Asian ward. A good Asian brother told of praying prior to taking a calculus test to be calm and to remember the things he had studied. He was doing pretty well until he came upon a problem that required him to convert feet into inches. He knew how to do the problem but could not complete it until he could make the conversion. However, he didn’t understand feet and inches because all of his schooling had been in the metric system. He prayed again, like the people of Alma who prayed silently and had their burdens lifted (see Mosiah 24:12–15). Then into his mind came the image of an advertisement he had seen recently of a foot-long sandwich; the ad said that it could be divided into two 6-inch sandwiches. Knowing that a foot is 12 inches, he was able to complete the problem.

The Lord knows when each sparrow falls. He knows each of us. He wants to be involved in the details of our lives, and the whispering of the Spirit is one of the ways He does this. Prayer is one way that we invite Him to give us this blessing.

I was reminded of this several years ago at Christmastime when one of our daughters had returned recently from her mission. My wife and I had purchased a gift for her—one that she was excited to receive. On Christmas Eve I suddenly realized that I didn’t remember where I had hidden the gift. (Remember, I’m the guy who beat a cherry tree with a baseball bat.) I racked my brain. I searched in all my favorite hiding places. I simply could not find the gift. I felt sick. Minutes went by, stretching into an hour or more. Nothing came to my mind. I decided to pray: “Father in Heaven, I need your help. I have a gift for my daughter but I can’t find it. She is a choice daughter, and

I don’t want to disappoint her. Please help me find the gift.” Immediately, I knew where to look. I found the gift. I testify that He knows us. He loves us. We can go to Him in prayer, even in the small and simple things.

Consider for a moment what some of your “flocks” and “fields” might be, and include them in your prayers. But remember, branches should not be deadweight. You have the responsibility to do your part. It does little good to ask for help to do your best on a test if you haven’t studied, to stay free from the H1N1 virus if you fail to take proper care of yourself, or to avoid improper actions on a date if you are out too long and too late and are too isolated.

President Boyd K. Packer illustrated this principle with his story of the little girl who prayed that her brother would not catch birds in his trap. After she prayed, she told her mother that she was positive her brother wouldn’t catch any more birds. Her mother asked her how she knew. The little girl replied that after she prayed, she had gone out and kicked the trap to pieces (see “Prayer and Promptings,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 46).

Pray morning and evening and during the day. Pray vocally and in your heart. If you have faith that your prayers are heard and answered in the Lord’s own way, the Holy Ghost can bring answers and guidance to you.

I love the words of the hymn “Sweet Hour of Prayer”:

*In seasons of distress and grief,  
My soul has often found relief  
And oft escaped the tempter’s snare  
By thy return, sweet hour of prayer!*  
[Hymns, 1985, no. 142]

To enjoy the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost, we must pray in faith continually.

**Number Two: Search the Scriptures Daily**

Nephi said, “For my soul delighteth in the scriptures, and my heart pondereth them, and

writeth them for the learning and the profit of my children” (2 Nephi 4:15).

The verb I’ve chosen is *search*. I could substitute other verbs such as *study* or *ponder*. Notice that the verb isn’t *locate*, as in “locate my scriptures.” Nor is the verb *dust off*, as in “dust off my scriptures.” The Holy Ghost opens our minds to truths in the scriptures and brings to our minds guidance from our scriptural learning, but we need to get scriptural truths into our minds in the first place. Finding and dusting are only preliminary steps.

Consider the words from 2 Nephi 31:20: “Feasting upon the word of Christ” (see also 2 Nephi 32:3). Feasting is certainly more than nibbling. We need to immerse ourselves in the scriptures like butter and honey flowing over a hot dinner roll. The sons of Mosiah brought thousands of people to Christ, having “searched the scriptures diligently” (Alma 17:2–3). They were well prepared for the revelation they received.

I appreciate what Elder Jay E. Jensen of the Seventy has written in his book *Treasure Up the Word*, in which he lists some important verbs that might be applied to our approach to the scriptures:

Read—*Peruse, look over, investigate.*

Study—*Explore, investigate, research, review, survey.*

Search—*Examine, explore, inspect, investigate, scrutinize. . . .*

Ponder—*Meditate, contemplate, reflect upon, think about, weigh heavily. . . .*

Liken—*Compare.*

[*Treasure Up the Word* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 29]

Verbs such as these suggest anything but a casual approach to the scriptures.

My wife, Cathy, shared with me an experience she had recently with inspiration from the scriptures. Our oldest son, who is in the military, was being deployed to the Middle

East. Cathy was extremely worried about him. At night sleep was difficult for her, and during the day she was continually unsettled. One day as she was studying the Book of Mormon, the thought came into her mind to turn to the chapters in Alma concerning the sons of Helaman (see Alma 53:20–21; 56:45–48; 57:21–27; 58:40). As she read, peace came into her mind and heart. She felt calm. She knew all would be well.

During the early years of our marriage, Cathy and I established the practice of family prayer and family scripture study. The memory of our sometimes discouraging efforts came back to me during general conference as Elder David A. Bednar told us that as he and his wife attempted to hold family home evening or family scripture reading, often one or the other of their boys would say, “He’s touching me!” or “Make him stop looking at me!” or “Mom, he’s breathing my air!” (“More Diligent and Concerned at Home,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 19).

As I read from the scriptures during these early mornings, the children’s eyes were often closed. “Kids, listen up,” I would say. “Dad, we’re meditating,” came the sleepy reply. Or when I would stop to explain a particular scripture, I heard more than once, “Dad, don’t talk about it. Just read it.” We wondered if we were doing any good at all. Now our children have children of their own. And they are having family prayer and family scripture study. And their children close their eyes to “meditate” as the parents are reading. Maybe closed eyes do not indicate completely closed connections.

We need to be diligent in our study of the scriptures and not take them for granted. Former Church President Ezra Taft Benson reminded us of this as he called us all to repentance regarding our inadequate reading of the Book of Mormon (see “The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion,” *Ensign*,

November 1986, 4–7). He quoted the following from D&C 84:57:

*And they shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon and the former commandments which I have given them, not only to say, but to do according to that which I have written.*

One of our hymns expresses an important connection between scripture study and the Holy Ghost:

*As I search the holy scriptures,  
Touch my spirit, Lord, I pray.  
May life's mysteries be unfolded  
As I study day by day.*  
["As I Search the Holy Scriptures," *Hymns*, 1985, no. 277]

To enjoy the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost, we must search the scriptures daily.

**Number Three: Keep the Commandments Always**

"Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46). "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

Elder Bruce A. Carlson gave us some valuable insights in the most recent general conference when he said, "Obedience to the Lord's commandments provides us confidence in our chosen path, qualifies us for His guidance and direction as we pursue our efforts, and offers us the potential to become like our Savior, Jesus Christ, and return to our Father's presence" ("When the Lord Commands," *Ensign*, May 2010, 40).

I agree with Elder Carlson: we do not qualify for His direction through the Holy Ghost—and we certainly cannot become like the Savior—if we do not obey what He has commanded us to do. To me the relationship is not complex. When we keep the commandments, we are happy. When we don't, we

aren't. "Wickedness never was happiness" (Alma 41:10).

The following scriptures teach us additional important truths about keeping the commandments:

- We are admonished that certain blessings come only by obedience to the law upon which those blessings are based (see D&C 130:20–21).
- We are promised that the Lord is bound when we do what He says (see D&C 82:10).
- He promises us His fulness if we keep His commandments (see D&C 93:20).
- And He promises gifts of the Spirit if we are obedient: "For verily I say unto you, they [the gifts of the Spirit] are given for the benefit of those who love me and keep all my commandments, and him that seeketh so to do" (D&C 46:9). "And him that *seeketh* so to do" (emphasis added)—this statement should give us encouragement.

Again, I find inspiration in the hymns of the Church: "Hold to the rod" ("The Iron Rod," *Hymns*, 1985, no. 274). Really hold onto it, tightly, with both hands. "Keep the commandments. In this there is safety and peace" ("Keep the Commandments," *Hymns*, 1985, no. 303).

To enjoy the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost, we must keep the commandments always.

**Number Four: Serve Others Willingly**

There are so many ways we can serve, but sometimes we think of service in terms of position. We may think we need to be a counselor in the bishopric, the president of our elders quorum or Relief Society, or a Gospel Doctrine teacher in order to give real service. It's just not so. Remember what was said of the Savior: He "went about doing good" (Acts 10:38). The Holy Ghost can guide us in following the Savior's example.



Following my release from a Church calling, I wondered, “Now just how good a Christian are you? Can you be a good neighbor and friend without a formal calling? Can you be more kind and considerate of others, more decent, and less quick to judge and find fault, and just go about trying to do good? And can you not just *do* good but *be* good?”

When I think of the hymn “I Am a Child of God,” I often think of a change that was made to the wording years ago. One line was originally penned, “Teach me all that I must *know* / To live with him someday.” It was changed to read, “Teach me all that I must *do* / To live with him someday” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 301; emphasis added). Perhaps when we sing it next time we can think, at least on the last verse, “Teach me all that I must *be* / To live with him someday.” I mention this because giving service for the right reasons and without a formal calling makes us particularly sensitive to the guidance of the Holy Ghost and helps us *become*.

So what are some areas of service that are often overlooked? How about home and visiting teaching? I believe that if you want to prepare for a mission or for marriage, you’ll not find a better way than by being a good home teacher or visiting teacher. And why? Because to be a good home or visiting teacher, we have to forget ourselves and think of someone else, and doing that is critical preparation for a mission or marriage.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks spoke of some often-undervalued areas of service—the sacrifice parents make for their children and the pain and loss of personal priorities and comforts mothers endure to bear and rear their children. He taught us the value of a smile and simple greeting to someone who is sitting alone at church as an important act of service (see “Unselfish Service,” *Ensign*, May 2009, 93–96). When we are willing to sacrifice and to reach out to others, the Holy Ghost will guide us in doing these things.

In my remarks to this point, I have said we don’t need an official call in the Church in order to give service and receive guidance from the Holy Ghost, and this is true. It is also true that church callings provide wonderful opportunities to receive inspiration and to give service. Therefore, I want to share what I call “10 Things I Have Learned About Church Callings.” They are given in no particular order and are not intended to be exhaustive.

1. Do not seek callings.
2. Accept callings when they come.
3. Magnify each calling when it comes.
4. Do not ask to be released.
5. When released, accept it with a good heart and attitude. We do not “own” our callings.
6. It does not matter *where* we serve. It does matter *how* we serve.
7. Do not be critical of how you are called or how you are released.
8. Study the Church handbooks specific to your calling and follow them.
9. Never speak negatively of your leaders. Seek and accept their counsel.
10. Find out what the Lord would have you do. Seek the Spirit.

And one other thing—have you noticed that if you try to serve unselfishly, you grow as you serve? Growth comes as a natural process. But if our primary motive for serving is so we can grow personally, our selfishness damages our connection to the Holy Ghost, and our growth is impeded. Only when we forget ourselves and focus on others do we become stronger through service.

Of all of the reasons we may have for serving, may those reasons be ever more frequently and consistently that we love others and our Father in Heaven (see Dallin H. Oaks, “Why Do We Serve?” *Ensign*, November 1984, 12–14).

One of our hymns expresses a plea for us to remember:

*Savior, may I love my brother  
As I know thou lovest me,  
Find in thee my strength, my beacon,  
For thy servant I would be.  
Savior, may I love my brother —  
Lord, I would follow thee.*  
[“Lord, I Would Follow Thee,” *Hymns*, 1985,  
no. 220]

To enjoy the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost, we must serve others willingly.

Sunday School general president Russell T. Osguthorpe taught us a pattern of teaching: to teach, invite, and promise (see “Teaching Helps Save Lives,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 15–17).

I have endeavored to follow this pattern. First, I have tried to *teach* correct principles. Second, I *invite* you, if the principles I’ve taught are not consistent in your lives, to make them so. Third, I *promise* you that if you do, the

Lord’s choicest blessings will be yours, for He has said, “And, if ye keep my commandments and endure to the end you shall have eternal life, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God” (D&C 14:7).

Remember the cherry tree. Branches separated from their roots wither and die, but when they are connected, they receive nourishment, which brings abundant life. The Holy Ghost is that vital connection all of us have with our Father in Heaven, through whom we receive the nourishment of His wisdom, guidance, and love.

To enjoy the constant companionship and blessing of the Holy Ghost we must

1. Pray in faith continually.
2. Search the scriptures daily.
3. Keep the commandments always.
4. Serve others willingly.

I so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.