

Comparing, Competing, and Individual Worth

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In his much-quoted talk on dating versus hanging out, Elder Dallin H. Oaks said:

A message given by a General Authority at a general conference . . . is given to be heard under the influence of the Spirit of the Lord, with the intended result that the listener learns from the talk and from the Spirit what he or she should do about it. ["The Dedication of a Lifetime," CES fireside for young adults, Oakland, California, 1 May 2005; emphasis in original]

No one is more aware than your speaker today that you are not, in this gathering, listening to a General Authority at a general conference. However, I hope the same principle will apply: that something you hear in the words of the prophets and the scriptures we will consider this morning will impress upon your mind and heart something you personally “should *do* about it.”

President Gordon B. Hinckley has repeatedly emphasized a harsh reality of which you are all aware. He has said, “The world into which you will move will be terribly competitive” (“Words of the Prophet: A Chosen Generation,” *New Era*, January 1999, 6). He has also said, “You are moving into the most competitive age the world has ever known.

All around you is competition” (“A Prophet’s Counsel and Prayer for Youth,” *Ensign*, January 2001, 4). In general conference in April 2007, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said that our culture has an “obsession with comparing [and] competing” (“The Tongue of Angels,” *Ensign*, May 2007, 17).

This morning I would like to review with you certain principles taught in the scriptures and by living prophets that relate to comparing and competing, first in our academic and professional lives, then more generally in our personal lives.

Preparation

One way to deal with academic and professional competition was recommended to me by my graduate advisor. He said, “The most important thing you need to do in graduate school is to impress the right people.” I thought that the gospel teaches us that we aren’t supposed to do things to “be seen of men” (Matthew 6:5), to call attention to ourselves, and to “aspire to the honors of men” (D&C

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121:35). And yet my advisor seemed to be saying that if I was going to succeed as a graduate student, that's exactly what I needed to do.

Of course there is truth in my advisor's observation. Obviously, if you don't impress the coach, you don't make the team; if you don't impress an employer, you don't get the job. Many seek to impress others and aspire to the honors of men by deliberately calling attention to themselves. Jesus chastised those in His time who did "all their works . . . to be seen of men" (Matthew 23:5).

In April 2007 general conference, President Boyd K. Packer said:

To seek after the praise of men, the scriptures caution us, is to be led carefully away from the only safe path to follow in life. . . . And the scriptures warn us plainly what follows when we "aspire to the honors of men." ["The Spirit of the Tabernacle," Ensign, May 2007, 28]

John recorded that, in the Savior's day,

among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue:

For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. [John 12:42–43]

Those who love the praise of men more than the praise of God seek to please men more than God, fear to offend man more than they fear to offend God, and are more concerned with what others think of them than with what God thinks. Men's commendation and contempt can lead us from the path of safety. In contrast, Jesus, speaking of His Father, said, "I do always those things that please him" (John 8:29). This is, as President Packer said, "the only safe path to follow in life."

Is it possible to "impress the right people," as my advisor suggested, without aspiring to the honors of men or seeking to draw attention to oneself? Fortunately, not long after my

experience with my advisor, I had the opportunity to pose that question to Elder Russell M. Nelson in a young single adult fireside. Elder Nelson thought for a moment, and then said, "If you are well prepared in everything you do in school and professionally, and do the highest quality work of which you are capable, your work will speak for itself, and the 'right people' will be impressed."

In his April 2007 conference talk, President Packer spoke in reference to music in the Church, but his words are applicable almost universally. He said, "Excellence does not call attention to itself" ("The Spirit of the Tabernacle," 26). It does not need to. As Elder Nelson taught me in that fireside long ago, and as President Packer taught in general conference, excellence will be obvious to those who need to be impressed. I know from experience that is true.

One such experience occurred three months ago when I was with a graduate student at a professional meeting. He had worked many hours on wording, rewording, and crafting his talk in order to present as clearly as possible his data and conclusions. He had organized, reordered, and revised his slides to present plainly the most important information in a logical, easy-to-follow sequence. This preparation continued in his hotel room well into the night before his talk. At the end of his presentation, which was the last in that session, many scientists in the audience came to the front to greet him as he stepped down from the podium to commend and congratulate him and even offer to remain in contact regarding his future research. One woman, an official from the National Institutes of Health who administers research grants, pulled me aside from the group and said, "This was tremendous! This is the way science should be done." The student in his preparation neither sought nor anticipated such praise. His goal was simply to make the best presentation possible and represent himself and BYU as capably as he could.

To do the highest quality work of which you are capable, sufficient to “impress the right people,” requires compliance with President Hinckley’s counsel to get “all the education you can” (“Prophet’s Counsel,” 4).

From the perspective of a nutrition professor, a college education is like a large buffet: you pay and then serve yourself as much as you want from a wide variety of foods. If after the meal you leave hungry, feeling you haven’t gotten your money’s worth, it’s your own fault. How many of you are getting your money’s worth and all the education you can at the educational and spiritual buffet that is BYU? President Hinckley also said, in speaking to priesthood leaders in a worldwide leadership training meeting:

I have been quoted as saying, “Do the best you can.” But I want to emphasize that it be the very best. We are too prone to be satisfied with mediocre performance. We are capable of doing so much better. [Gordon B. Hinckley, “Standing Strong and Immovable,” *Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting: The Priesthood and the Auxiliaries of the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary*, 10 January 2004 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 21]

Is a young man or woman really getting all the education they can if they are “satisfied with mediocre performance”? President James E. Faust gave this reassuring counsel:

If you prepare to walk down the path of life, you can be rewarded beyond your dreams and expectations. But to achieve this, you must work very hard, save, be wise, and be alert. You must learn to deny yourselves of worldly gratification. . . . Steadiness and toil will serve you better than brilliance. [“The Message: Don’t Be Afraid,” *New Era*, July 1998, 7]

Thus, three keys in dealing with academic and professional competition are being well

prepared, working very hard, and doing the very best you can, refusing “to be satisfied with mediocre performance.” To do so, President Hinckley urged, “Sacrifice a car; sacrifice anything that is needed to be sacrificed to qualify yourselves to do the work of the world” (“Prophet’s Counsel,” 4).

Integrity

I will mention just one other principle related to academic and professional competition. It is a sad sign of the times that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has had to organize an Office of Research Integrity, whose sole purpose is to try to maintain honesty and credibility in biomedical research by combating the plagiarism and outright fabrication of data by the occasional scientist who buckles under the competitive pressure to publish or perish. In this environment, being a man or woman of integrity will not put you at a competitive disadvantage among those who may be compromising standards of honesty; rather, it will work to your benefit. Here’s how.

While I was at another professional meeting with a graduate student some years ago, we ran into the chair of the session in which the student had presented earlier. After a few pleasantries, this respected scientist said, “You know what I like about your presentations? If it’s from BYU, we know it’s right and we can trust it.”

President John Taylor prophesied:

You will see the day that Zion will be as far ahead of the outside world in everything pertaining to learning of every kind as we are today in regard to religious matters. You mark my words, and write them down, and see if they do not come to pass. [JD 21:100]

It occurred to me that perhaps the fulfillment of President Taylor’s prophecy might have as much to do with integrity and credibility as with publications and professional

acclaim. As issues of integrity become more and more problematic in a cutthroat competitive society, those looking for answers will look more and more to institutions and individuals who get it right and can be trusted. Integrity is not a hindrance to your academic and professional success. It is essential to it.

Comparison

With respect to comparing and competing in our personal lives, Elder Holland counseled parents:

Try not to compare your children, even if you think you are skillful at it. You may say most positively that “Susan is pretty and Sandra is bright,” but all Susan will remember is that she isn’t bright and Sandra that she isn’t pretty. Praise each child individually for what that child is, and help him or her escape our culture’s obsession with comparing, competing, and never feeling we are “enough.” [“Tongue of Angels,” 17]

It is difficult to refrain from comparing yourself to others when you know that professors, employers, and others are doing just that. However, a spirit of comparing and competing may be evidence of the sin of pride. President Ezra Taft Benson, in his classic talk on pride, said:

*Another major portion of this very prevalent sin of pride is enmity toward our fellowmen. We are tempted daily to elevate ourselves above others and diminish them. [“Beware of Pride,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 4]*

Those who view their contemporaries as competitors to be beaten rather than as brothers and sisters to be served often believe that others’ successes diminish their own. They are therefore more apt to find and point out faults of those around them. Such critics run the risk of losing friends, who may wonder what the critic says to others about them. In contrast, we are commanded not only to “cease to find fault

one with another” (D&C 88:124) but also to “strengthen your brethren in all your conversation” (D&C 108:7).

President Benson also said:

The proud make every man their adversary by pitting their intellects, opinions, works, wealth, talents, or any other worldly measuring device against others. In the words of C. S. Lewis: “Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. . . . It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone.” (Mere Christianity, New York: Macmillan, 1952, pp. 109–10.) [“Beware of Pride,” 4]

A person who compares and considers herself superior in some way may feel an unjustified sense of accomplishment and expertise. However, the highest score on an exam does not necessarily indicate mastery of the material. If she is satisfied with simply being better than someone else, she may, in the words of President Hinckley, be “too prone to be satisfied with mediocre performance [when she is] capable of doing so much better” (“Standing Strong,” 21).

Such complacency, born of comparison, may creep into spiritual matters as well. It is tempting in a rapidly decaying world to consider ourselves righteous in comparison to what’s going on around us. However, there is a danger in assessing our spirituality using such a relative measure. The Lord’s standard is high, absolute, and unchanging. The world is rapidly becoming a more wicked place. If we are content to simply be better than the world, comparing ourselves to its standards and practices instead of to the Lord’s, we may pride ourselves on the widening gap between us and the world while at the same time being dangerously oblivious to the increasing distance between us and the standards of righteousness we have covenanted to keep.

Comparison of our weaknesses with others' talents or of our talents with those who are truly gifted can be discouraging and may decrease our sense of self-worth. Such comparison may lead to the sins of envy and ingratitude as we focus on and fret about what we don't have rather than on what we have been given. Compulsive comparison can rob us of the enjoyment we might still experience in the expression of the talents we have been given and in the talents of others. The ability to rejoice in the successes and talents of others increases our capacity for happiness and joy as we experience those feelings each time someone we know succeeds.

Preoccupation with what others are doing, how they're performing, and how they're being rewarded or treated starts early in life, with children often asking, "How come she gets to . . . ?" or "Why doesn't he have to . . . ?" Most outgrow the terminology, but for many the preoccupation persists. Focusing on others' talents and tasks, worrying about what rewards they may be receiving, and feeling we're in competition for that recognition may easily distract us from our own responsibilities, inhibit the development of our talents, and divert us from our personal missions and ministries.

In the last chapter of the Gospel of John, we read of Jesus' charge to Peter as the two walked along the seashore:

Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following. . . .

Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do?

Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me. [John 21:20–22]

The message to Peter and to us is clear: "Don't concern yourself with others' assignments or performance. You worry about what I've asked you to do."

Individual Worth

While serving as a stake missionary, I had the assignment of going each Sunday to the Utah County Jail to teach a Sunday School lesson while we were seated on folding chairs in the hallway under the watchful eyes of surveillance cameras. The favorite Bible story of those who came to class was the parable of the talents:

For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods.

And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.

Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents.

And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two.

But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money.

After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them.

And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more.

His lord said unto him, 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.

He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them.

His lord said unto him, Well done, 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.

[Matthew 25:14–23]

You know what happened to the last servant. The things the inmates liked the most about this story were that the first two

servants got the same reward and the Lord didn't compare them one with another. Among other lessons, this parable reinforces the principle that where "much is given much is required" (D&C 82:3) and suggests that where less is given, less may be required.

To each of us the Lord might say as He did to Moses, "I have a work for thee . . . , my son [or my daughter]" (Moses 1:6). Just as the Lord in the parable gave talents and set expectations for each servant individually, so also does He provide for each of us a unique blend of talents and circumstances, including formal Church callings and other opportunities individually customized to accomplish His purposes in our lives and in the lives of those we can bless.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell assured us, "No one else is placed exactly as we are in our opportune human orbits" ("Consecrate Thy Performance," *Ensign*, May 2002, 37–38).

When the Jews faced extermination in Persia, the new Persian queen, Esther, who was of Jewish descent, was reminded by her cousin Mordecai: "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14). So might each of you be asked, "Who knoweth whether thou art come to [your particular place and circumstances with your unique blend of talents] for such a time as this?"

The work the Lord has for us to do may not involve serving in high-profile positions in the Church—which are, sadly, a source of comparison and competition to some. More important is our faithful service in whatever position we are called. Speaking of our Church callings, President Hinckley said:

*We are all in this great endeavor together. . . . Your obligation is as serious in your sphere of responsibility as is my obligation in my sphere. No calling in this church is small or of little consequence. All of us in the pursuit of our duty touch the lives of others. [Gordon B. Hinckley, "This Is the Work of the Master," *Ensign*, May 1995, 71]*

In the first general conference to which I paid serious attention, Elder Robert L. Simpson said something that has stuck with me ever since:

*There are those who associate high calling in the Church with guaranteed rights to the blessings of heaven, but I wish to declare without reservation that the ultimate judgment for every man will be on the simplest terms, and most certainly on what each has done to bless other people in a quiet, unassuming way. ["Go, and Do Thou Likewise," *Ensign*, July 1973, 23]*

"Bless[ing] other people in a quiet, unassuming way" is required of all of us who have covenanted "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" (Mosiah 18:8–9).

This "bless[ing] other people in a quiet, unassuming way" is part of what the *Young Women Personal Progress* manual calls "my own divine mission" (*Young Women Personal Progress: Standing as a Witness of God* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001], 26) in describing the value of individual worth. Sister Bonnie D. Parkin, former Relief Society general president, in her BYU devotional talk in February 2007, echoed the theme of "my own divine mission" when she said:

*Each of us has a personal ministry. . . .
 . . . It embraces the people who come and go across the path of our life. It extends beyond our temporary callings as presidents, counselors, secretaries, teachers, and so on. . . .*

Our personal ministry is sacred and precious. It allows us to become an extension of the Lord's love. ["Personal Ministry: Sacred and Precious," BYU devotional, 13 February 2007, 2, 7]

Our personal ministry may not bring to us the recognition and the praise of men. However, it will require the exercise of all the talents and spiritual gifts the Lord has given us as well as those He has given us the capacity to develop. Many of the more notable spiritual gifts are listed in 1 Corinthians 12, Moroni 10, and Doctrine and Covenants 46. However, those are not the only gifts. Bruce R. McConkie wrote, "Spiritual gifts are endless in number and infinite in variety" (*A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985], 371). Many more gifts are mentioned in talks on this subject given by Elder Marvin J. Ashton and Elder Robert D. Hales of the Quorum of the Twelve. Here are some other spiritual gifts:

asking
 listening
 hearing and using a still, small voice
 being able to weep
 avoiding contention
 being agreeable
 avoiding vain repetition
 seeking that which is righteous
 not passing judgment
 looking to God for guidance
 being a disciple
 caring for others
 being able to ponder
 offering prayer
 bearing a mighty testimony
 receiving the Holy Ghost
 being able to calm
 being able to be calm
 being able to care
 being able to study
 having charity

While showing and discussing these gifts in an institute class, one young woman asked, "What's the gift to weep?"

Another class member hesitatingly raised her hand and then said quietly, "I can tell you

about that." She then made reference, without specific details, to an extremely trying time in her life. During that time a friend came by to offer what help she could. The class member said that after describing her difficulties to her friend, all the friend could do was put her arm around her shoulder and weep. Our class member was blessed by her friend's exercise of the gift to weep, showing that she shared her sorrow, which made the burden a little lighter.

There are many possible ways to answer Elder Oaks' question about what each of us should *do* about today's message. We can "pray . . . with all the energy of heart, that [we] may be filled with [charity]" (Moroni 7:48), which "envieth not; . . . vaunteth not itself, [and] seeketh not her own" (1 Corinthians 13:4–5). We can try making it through a day without a single self-reference that draws attention to ourselves. As Sister Parkin suggested, we can pray, "Help me to be the answer to someone's prayer today" ("Personal Ministry," 6). Or, as Elder Henry B. Eyring urged in April general conference, we can pray, "Please let me serve, this day" ("This Day," *Ensign*, May 2007, 90). We can resolve to sincerely compliment someone each day, to thank someone each day, or try to go a day without finding fault.

In closing, let me suggest a scripture that helps me and that I hope will help you to remember this morning's message. President Ezra Taft Benson said:

The constant and most recurring question in our minds, touching every thought and deed of our lives, should be, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6.) ["Jesus Christ—Gifts and Expectations," Ensign, December 1988, 2]

In many cases our interpretation of scriptural passages depends on which word or words we emphasize. If this question is read and remembered as asking "What wilt *thou* have me to do?" it will help us to focus on God's will, His honor, His praise, and His blessings and

distinguish them from those of men. If we ask “What wilt thou have *me* to do?” it will remind us of our uniqueness, our individual and infinite worth, and our “own divine mission” our Heavenly Father expects us to accomplish, regardless of what others accomplish. If we ask “What wilt thou have me to *do*?” it will remind us to translate our good intentions and what we know into righteous action.

I do not have the ability to impress upon your minds and hearts as powerfully and indelibly as I desire the glorious reality that each of you individually is of infinite worth to God, your Heavenly Father. Your value to Him is independent of your body mass index; your accomplishments in arts, academics, or athletics; your possessions, popularity, or marital status; your current calling in the Church; or any other thing that can be a source of comparison and competition. His love for you is *infinite*—quantitatively and qualitatively—and *intimate*—intensely personal and specific. He knows your name, your successes and set-

backs, your triumphs and defeats, your fears, your doubts, your hopes, your desires, your motivations, your thoughts, your words, and your actions. He feels what you feel, He shares your joys and sorrows, and He desires your happiness now and forever.

May you seek the praise of God and do always those things that please Him. May you cease unhealthy comparison to others and delight in your individuality and uniqueness. May you be faithful in your Church assignments and in your individual, personalized ministries—your own divine missions—using your unique blend of talents and spiritual gifts to “bless other people in a quiet, unassuming way.” I testify that God our Heavenly Father lives. I bear testimony that Jesus Christ is His Son and the head of this Church. I testify that the mind and the will of the Lord are made known to us in the words of living prophets and apostles, including the counsel we have considered this morning. Of these things I testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.