

# Commencement Address

CECIL B. DEMILLE

## David O. McKay

Graduates, fellow students, patrons of the Brigham Young University: It has been my privilege to introduce a number of great men to audiences, but I can say truly that I have never felt the joy in introducing a speaker to an audience that I experience at this moment in announcing to you, as the commencement speaker, Mr. Cecil B. DeMille.

Thomas Carlyle, in his *Heroes and Hero Worshippers*, expressed this thought:

*Great Men, taken up in any way, are profitable company. We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of the world; and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness; in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them. ["The Hero as Divinity," *Heroes and Hero Worship* (1840)]*

Our speaker for this evening is one of those living light-fountains in whose presence one feels inspired and uplifted.

One element of greatness, we are told, is the ability to choose the right with invincible resolution. Your speaker for this evening has demonstrated in our country that he possesses this virtue, when he stood for what he thought was right, and every state in the Union, I think, without exception, has come to his point of view. But it is not only in his ability to choose the right that I refer to him as a great man, but because of his soul, his faith in God, his confidence in his fellowmen. I love him because of his nobility.

You already know that we have with us tonight the greatest producer of films, one who through his motion pictures has reached millions and millions of people in all parts of the world, carrying a message of faith in God. His latest production, *The Ten Commandments*, is a masterpiece, and this great man was prompted only with the desire to impress humanity with the fact that God is real. Already millions have been impressed. Even before *The Ten Commandments* had its premiere, many millions were led to read scriptures because of

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*Cecil B. DeMille was a Hollywood film producer when this commencement address was given at Brigham Young University on 31 May 1957.*

Mr. DeMille's productions than perhaps from any other source in the world.

Students, I congratulate you upon the opportunity that is yours tonight to hear a message from this great soul. And you may know when he speaks that he is speaking from his heart, giving a message of faith as the greatest moving power of the world, and that the law of God is the greatest force operating in the world.

With all my heart and with the love of a friend, I introduce to you Mr. Cecil B. DeMille, who will give the commencement address.

### **Cecil B. DeMille**

That is a hard introduction to follow.

President Wilkinson, my very dear friend President McKay, members of the faculty, ladies and gentlemen, and, in particular, my classmates of 1957: Listening to the introduction which President McKay has so eloquently, so deeply, movingly made to me and receiving the degree with which you propose to honor me, I feel a little like Macbeth when the messenger from the king hailed him as Thane of Cawdor. He said, "The Thane of Cawdor lives; why do you dress me / In borrowed robes?" (William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act 1, scene 3, lines 109–10). I feel a little abashed before my classmates sitting down there. They worked for their degrees.

My education stopped when I was seventeen years old and ran away from college to enlist in the army and fight in the Spanish-American War. My family got wind of that heroic deed and quickly put a stop to my dreams of military glory. That is how it happened that Cuba was liberated and somebody else carried the message to Garcia. And now, after all these years, I have come back to school again to be received in this great university as one of its doctors.

If Brigham Young University chooses to honor me in this way, to enroll my name alongside the names of the other members of this

class of 1957, it cannot be because of any academic achievement akin to theirs. It can only be in recognition of certain ideas which I have tried in one way or another to express in my lifetime and in my work.

Those ideas are not mine.

I am not their originator, but their servant.

It is in that spirit that I accept, humbly and gratefully, this high honor—which I shall cherish as an additional inspiration and incentive to be, as far as I am able, a good servant of the ideas and ideals represented by this university, which I can now call "alma mater."

I have also a very personal reason for being grateful for this honor because it forms another link in the strong bond of one of the most valued friendships that I have, the friendship of a man who combines wisdom and warmth of heart, in whom four-score years have not dampened the enthusiasm of youth, a man who can truly and literally be called a Latter-day Saint, the president of your Church, David O. McKay.

I have known many members of your Church—and I have never known one who was not a good citizen and a fine, wholesome person—but David O. McKay embodies, more than anyone that I have ever known, the virtues and the drawing power of your Church.

David McKay, almost thou persuadest me to be a Mormon! And, knowing what family life means to the Latter-day Saints, I cannot speak or think of President McKay without thinking too of that gracious and spirited young lady who is his wife.

Only he knows—but the rest of us who know her can guess—what Mrs. McKay has meant to the president and to his work in the years since their lives were joined together "for time and eternity."

The honor you have done me today gives me also a link with another great name in your history—the name that is fittingly borne by this university which he founded, when in 1875 he sent Karl Maeser here to Provo to organize

what has now become the keystone of your Church's magnificent educational system.

The name of Brigham Young is great not only in your annals but in the story of the West and of all America.

Gracious reference has been made this evening to our production of *The Ten Commandments*—which is the story of Moses and the birth of freedom under God. Who can fail to be struck by the similarities between Moses and Brigham Young—between the Exodus of the children of Israel and the Mormon trek across the plains and mountains to this land of Deseret? Moses and Brigham Young were both strong leaders of a strong people.

As the Israelites were brought to Egypt by Joseph, so your people were led to the banks of the Mississippi by another Joseph—but, at Nauvoo and Carthage, just as in Goshen, persecution and martyrdom were their lot, until in the providence of God a leader arose to band them together and give them hope and courage and lead them to freedom in a new land. For both, the way was hard—but it was blessed.

When Brigham Young saw the Mississippi River freeze over, letting the ox carts drive across, how could he fail to think of that earlier time when the Red Sea opened to let the children of Israel walk dry-shod between the walls of water?

Moses and Brigham Young were men of faith, a virile, driving faith—and that faith sustained their people through every hardship.

As Marcus Bach has written of the Mormon pioneers:

*They fought the weather in every season, battled hostile Indians in every territory and conquered fear of defeat in every company. . . .*

*. . . Death and burial, birth and pain, tragedy and terror could not hold them back.* [Marcus Bach, *Faith and My Friends* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1951), 283–84]

The children of Israel sang a song of triumph after crossing the Red Sea when they rested at the oasis that still is called the Well of Moses on the Sinai Peninsula.

The followers of Brigham Young—as they camped in the mud and often had only the bark of trees for food—still could fill the night air of the prairies with song, for nothing could quench the joy born of their vivid faith. They had read in the Book of Mormon, “Men are, that they might have joy”—and to this day that joyousness is one of the most appealing aspects of your faith.

At length they came to that spot now marked by the noble monument dedicated ten years ago—where Brigham Young spoke the historic, prophetic words, “This is the right place.” But that was not the end of the Mormon journey, any more than the brink of Jordan was the end of the trail for the Israelites of old. It was not the end for them any more than today is the end of the journey for you, my classmates of 1957. It was their commencement day.

Moses and Brigham Young were more than leaders. They were lawgivers and they were educators—and those two functions came together in the lessons and the tasks they have left behind for us to learn and do.

It is expected of a commencement speaker that he should leave (with his younger classmates) at least one thought that they will remember—that may have a lasting meaning and value for them. The same thought that prompted me to produce *The Ten Commandments*—the same thought that I am sure Moses and Brigham Young had when they taught and legislated for their people, and that thought is a greater understanding of God's law.

We are too inclined to think of law as something merely restrictive—something hemming us in. We sometimes think of law as the opposite of liberty. But that is a false conception. That is not the way that God's inspired prophets and lawgivers looked upon the law. Law

has a twofold purpose. It is meant to govern and it is also meant to educate. Take, for example, one of the most ordinary, everyday laws affecting all of us—the traffic regulations. The traffic laws, when they are observed, prevent accidents. They also produce good drivers. That is their educational function.

The Ten Commandments of God, when they are observed, prevent murder, stealing, false witness, envy, the worship of false idols, and the other sins and crimes against which God on Mount Sinai thundered “Thou shalt not.” Today some people are inclined to look upon those commandments as a bit archaic. But they are not. They are more modern than today’s newspaper—because they are timeless. “I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” We do not bow before giant birds of carved granite or wooden idols with stone eyes. But we have other gods competing with God. We have never bent the knee before a graven image of Hathor—but there is also a graven image on a dollar bill.

Is there a man or woman who can honestly say that they have never put their ambition or their vanity above God—or worshipped flesh more than God—or worshipped the blue-white glisten of a fine diamond or the earthy beat of rock and roll or even worshipped themselves above the worship of God? These and anything else that represents values to us can be false gods. And so it is with all the commandments.

We must look beneath the literal, the surface meaning of the words. We must take the trouble to understand them; for how can we obey commands that we do not understand? But the commandments too have an educative function—which you can see in the life of anyone who keeps them. They produce good character. The Ten Commandments are not rules to obey as a personal favor to God. They are the fundamental principles without which mankind cannot live together. They make of those who keep them faithful, strong, wholesome, confident, dedicated men and women. This is

so because the commandments come from the same Divine Hand that fashioned our human nature.

God does not contradict Himself. He did not create man and then, as an afterthought, impose upon him a set of arbitrary, irritating, restrictive rules. He made man free—and then gave him the commandments to keep him free.

We have lately been reading about the terrible, destructive floods in Texas and Oklahoma—the lives lost and the property ruined by the awful, unbridled power of water when it is unchecked and unchanneled. But the power of that same water, channeled between strong levees or stored behind a great dam, could have given light and warmth and health and joy to ten thousand homes. The Law of God is the dike and the dynamo that channels and converts the power of human freedom for human good.

Allow me, if you will, to illustrate that from our production of *The Ten Commandments*. Those of you who have seen it will remember the orgy of the golden calf. Those of you who have not yet seen our picture can read of that orgy in chapter 32 of the book of Exodus—and you will see that our version of it is rather milder than the Bible’s. The children of Israel had been freed from the bitter bondage of Egypt. They had seen the wonders of God in the desert and the divided sea as His strong hand led them forth. They were free, they thought. Then Moses left them, to go up the mountain and receive the Law. No sooner was he gone the short space of forty days and nights when, in spite of all his teaching, in spite of all the marvels they had seen God work, the children of Israel became slaves again—not this time of a tyrant like Pharaoh but slaves of their own passions and their own fears.

Some, who do not know either the Bible or human nature, may see in the orgy of the golden calf only a riot of Hollywood’s imaginations—but those who have eyes to see will see

in it the awful lesson of how quickly a nation or a man can fall without God's law.

If man will not be ruled by God, he will certainly be ruled by tyrants—and there is no tyranny more imperious or more devastating than man's own selfishness, without the law.

We cannot break the Ten Commandments. We can only break ourselves against them—or else, by keeping them, rise through them to the fullness of freedom under God. God means us to be free. With divine daring, He gave us the power of choice.

“Who is on the Lord's side? let him come unto me,” said Moses, holding aloft the tablets of the Law (Exodus 32:26). The same choice is ours today. The choice is always ours. It is yours, my classmates of 1957: your generation will make decisions more fateful, more fraught with good or evil for the world, than perhaps any previous generation in the history of the world.

What fills my heart with hope this evening—what makes me so very glad to be wearing this hood of a doctor of Brigham Young University—is that I am standing among men and women and talking to young men and women most of whom have made their choice, who are committed to the Lord's side, which is also the side of humanity and liberty.

And I am speaking to all of you—not only to the great majority who are Latter-day Saints but also to the minority who are not. Remember, I am one of that minority here this evening! I am an Episcopalian—but I am speaking to you just as I would to a graduating class of my own church or of other Protestants, Catholics, Jews, or Moslems when I urge you to hold fast to the high conception of Eternal Law, which the prophets and teachers of all those faiths have taught.

Like mighty rivers flowing from a single source, all the great religions of the Western world stem from Moses. On their broad streams they carry the precious cargo of their different traditions—but they all share

in a common reverence for the Law of God revealed through Moses.

Jesus of Nazareth said, “For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me” (John 5:46).

These great religions all teach, as you have been taught here at Brigham Young University, that the Law of God is a law of life, a law of liberty, a law of peace and joy—a law meant not to restrict but to set free your energies and aspirations for life's highest purposes. All this you know, but there are many in the world who do not know it.

Some of you have gone and others of you will go out into the world as missionaries of your faith. But, whether officially commissioned by the Church or not, all of us have the call to be missionaries, to share with our fellowmen the good news that we have heard: the greatness of God and the goodness of His Law.

Our mission field may be a nation—or a neighborhood. That does not matter. To one it may be given to tell that story—ever ancient, ever new—through a medium that will reach hundreds of millions of people for generations. Another's lifework may be accomplished when he plants the seed of truth in the soul of a single child. That does not matter either—for who can say which achievement is the greater? What matters, and matters supremely, is not how many things we do but what we are.

A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit—and a city set on a hill cannot be hid. If our lives are structured according to the Law of God—if we see His Presence burning in every bush, on every mountainside—if, wherever we are, we can say, “‘This is the place’ where I am called to serve”—then men will be drawn toward what we stand for, as they were drawn to follow Moses and Brigham Young and other leaders whose lives embodied the eternal principles.

You who belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have a unique tradition to uphold.

Herbert Hoover said, “One of the finest communities in the whole United States sprang from Brigham Young’s founding.” That is true. Keep it true—by being true.

The voice that speaks to you tonight will long be stilled before you reach my age and look back upon *your* handiwork. But the thoughts that I have tried to give you—from this platform and through our production of

*The Ten Commandments*—will live on, because they are eternal.

As I said in the beginning, I am not their originator, I am their servant. So are you. Serve them well. Bear your unfailing witness to the Light—and the people that walk in darkness will see it—and upon them that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, and upon us all, the Light will shine.