

## *Focus on What Matters Most*

M. RUSSELL BALLARD

President Monson, Elder Eyring, President Bateman, President Samuelson, Brother Tingey, the board of trustees, faculty members, graduates, and my brothers and sisters, I am simply overwhelmed and deeply grateful for your kindness and consideration in finding me worthy to receive an honorary doctoral degree from Brigham Young University. Please know that without the constant support of my dear wife, Barbara, and my family, this honor could not be given to me.

It is a special pleasure for me to be here with you, Pamela, as you are honored with the Presidential Citation. This is a great lady and an admired friend. I extend my congratulations to you, Pamela Atkinson.

For more than 50 years, Dale Tingey and I, along with our wives, have met in a study group. We served our missions at the same time. Dale, we love you and know that Jeanette and your family are surely proud of the good work you continue to do. Congratulations, dear friend.

My years of service on the board of trustees and as chairman of the executive committee of the board were most enlightening because I became much more familiar with the great

work that is accomplished throughout the Church Educational System. The blessings that come to our youth through participating in the seminary and institute programs, the business college, and our universities are second to none in the whole world. It has been a revelation to me to see firsthand the exceptional education that you graduates have received through the dedicated work of the administration and the highly qualified and talented faculty. You are so blessed to have had the privilege of receiving your education at a university in which the environment is based upon the doctrines, principles, values, and practices of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. To study among students who are primarily Latter-day Saints and who accept and strive to live the school's honor code is a unique and special privilege.

It is my feeling that you graduates may not fully understand or appreciate the privilege

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*M. Russell Ballard was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this commencement address was given on 24 April 2003.*

that has been yours to be educated here until you go out to be tested in this world that seems to be progressively more challenging and difficult. Then you will come to know that the strengthening of your testimonies of gospel truths may well be the most important part of the education you received here at BYU. How grateful we must all be to our Heavenly Father and to His Beloved Son Jesus Christ for restoring the fulness of the gospel once again to the earth through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

I trust that each one of you also appreciates the outstanding leadership of President Bateman and his good wife, Marilyn. In my lifetime I have been privileged to know great leaders of industry, government, and education. I can assure you that President Bateman has led BYU with unusual skill and remarkable vision. He has seen the future of education and has led the university to the cutting edge of excellence. Thank you, President, for all you and Marilyn have done here at Brigham Young University.

Those students who will come after you graduates will also be blessed with a president and his wife who will lead this great university in its pursuit of excellence. President Samuelson and his wife, Sharon, are wonderful people whom the faculty, staff, and students will find easy to love and to follow. President Samuelson and I have worked very closely together for many years. I know him well, and I assure you the university will be in very good hands.

Now, for a few minutes I would like to talk to you about some of my experiences in life. This year I will be 75 years old, and I have learned a few things in the school of hard knocks. When I was the age of most of you, I attended the University of Utah. I had returned from my mission in England, where I had learned in some wonderful and special ways that the Church is true and that Jesus truly is the Christ—the Savior and Redeemer of the world. Those lessons were and still are

among the very most important I have ever learned in my life.

At the conclusion of my mission, I promised the Lord that whatever else happened to me in life, I would always be willing to accept any call to serve Him from those who would preside over me in the Church. I am happy that I can report to you that I have kept that promise. I have served in many capacities, from a teacher of children to a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. As I look back on all of these years of Church service, I am grateful that I have kept the promise I had made with the Lord 53 years ago. May I suggest to each of you graduates that you consider making a similar promise to the Lord, if you have not already done so. I can assure you that if you will keep your promise to accept any call that comes to you to serve the Lord, great joy, peace, satisfaction, and happiness will also be yours.

I am often asked by young Church members, “What do I have to do to be prepared to serve the Lord in His Church?”

My simple answer is, “Learn to focus your life on those things that matter most.”

I offer that same counsel to each of you on your day of graduation. Do not allow anything to preempt your focus on the eternal plan of happiness that our Heavenly Father has prepared for His faithful children. Participating in the great plan of happiness is best accomplished in our lives by making and keeping covenants with God. Through service and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ our testimonies grow, and through solid testimonies we can stay focused on the things that really matter. This effort to stay focused has served me well, and I assure you the same will be true in your lives.

I have learned along the way a few things that might be helpful to you. Be wise and careful in the decisions that you make in your lives. Seek constantly and strive to live worthy of the companionship of the Holy Ghost. The power of the Spirit will work with you and

will help you to know what you should do and what you should not do.

I learned a very important lesson when I was your age. Upon my return from my mission, I took up selling cars at Ballard Motor Company as part-time work while I attended the university. I worked hard and became quite successful. I was taking many classes in business and knew that as a part-time salesman I was earning considerably more money than the professors who were teaching me in the business school.

So I said to myself, "If I quit school and put full-time effort into sales, I could really become financially secure."

Big mistake! I only had one year left to graduate. In making that decision I lost my focus on what mattered most.

For many years I have wished that I had graduated. Now, in my business career I don't believe a degree would have affected my capacity to earn money, but the fact that I would have held a degree over these many years would have been a wise thing for me to have accomplished. So I congratulate each one of you on your day of graduation from Brigham Young University.

In the automobile business, the manufacturers of different model automobiles have a lot of skill in attracting young businessmen to become dealers for their line of automobiles. In 1958 I was approached by Ford Motor Company to introduce in Salt Lake City a brand-new line of cars. This line of cars was to be the best that Ford Motor had ever built because it would carry the name of the company president at that time, Edsel Ford. He was the son of Henry Ford, Sr., and Edsel's son was Henry Ford, Jr.

Well, some of you already know the story because I have shared it from time to time. I made the serious mistake of signing the Edsel franchise. I hope it doesn't destroy your faith or confidence in the Quorum of the Twelve that

you have speaking to you this afternoon the first and only Edsel dealer in the state of Utah.

From the minute I saw this new line of automobiles I had an impression: "Don't sign the franchise." That was the Spirit whispering to me, "Don't do this."

Then, following that experience came the great pressure from Ford Motor Company with all of their skill and expertise to get me to sign the franchise, which I finally did.

In just one year Ford Motor and its dealers lost hundreds of millions of dollars. That was real money in 1958. The result of not following the prompting of the Spirit was that my loss took our company very close to the brink of bankruptcy. With hard work, diligence, and the support of good partners and by maintaining unquestionable integrity and honesty, we somehow survived and continued in business.

Now, the lesson for you to learn from this personal experience is to listen to the promptings of the Spirit, for it will guide you in what you should or should not do as you make decisions in your personal and spiritual life.

When I was not yet 30 years of age, I was called to be the bishop of my ward. One of the members of my ward was a wonderful, elderly widow who was living with her daughter's family. I had a special relationship with this dear widow.

On one evening in the wintertime I had left the bishop's office and was on my way home. It was about 10 o'clock at night. I had a strong impression to go visit my special friend. I looked at my watch and said to myself, "It is too late. It is snowing. I will go see her first thing in the morning." I went to bed and, as you would suspect, had a hard time getting to sleep.

Early the next morning I went to see this dear sister. Her daughter came to the door, and I could see that she had been crying. She greeted me with these words: "Oh, Bishop, thank you for coming. Mother passed away two hours ago."

Now, can you see this picture? Here I am on the doorstep, and of all the people in my ward who deserved to have her bishop hold her hand and give her a blessing of peace and comfort, it was this dear sister. I missed that opportunity because I didn't listen. I reasoned away this strong prompting from the Spirit.

I share these two examples with you graduates of not responding to the promptings of the Spirit because these experiences have taught me to pay attention to the Spirit and to respond without argument. Learn to know when you are being prompted to do something. It may be a simple, small thing, like sending a note to someone or making a phone call to someone in need. Learning this will serve you well all the days of your life.

I could share with you hundreds of powerful, spiritual experiences that have come into my life as a result of responding to spiritual promptings. I know now what the Lord wants me to do. I cannot count the times I have visited the sick or those who were in need—not because they called upon me but because the Spirit directed me to go to them.

My dear young friends, this same blessing can be yours in your Church callings and in your personal lives. You will receive promptings, and, from my point of view, there is no education more important than learning to know and respond to the promptings of the Spirit. Stay worthy of and live for the companionship of the Spirit.

Another important thing for you to learn is to exercise good judgment in every decision

you make in life. I know of no attribute that is more sought after and appreciated in the world and in the Church than the ability to use good judgment and common sense in making decisions. To know how to exercise good judgment you must become a good listener. Be slow to judge but quick to seek to know all of the facts. The fully educated person is one who has developed this ability to understand real issues and apply sound judgment in seeking right solutions. By developing this skill, you will be sought after as a leader in your profession. You will be a better eternal companion, a better father or mother, and a better Church leader.

May God bless you graduates as you now go into the world that you will stay focused on what matters most, that you will seek the influence of the Spirit, and that you will exercise good judgment in your lives. Add these things to the formal education you have received here at Brigham Young University, and your life will be filled with many more accomplishments and the personal satisfaction of knowing you have made a difference during your life.

I conclude as I began. I am deeply grateful for this honorary doctorate of Christian service from this great university. I will always strive to be worthy of it. I leave you my testimony that Jesus is the Christ, that Joseph Smith is His prophet, and that the Church is true. May the Lord bless each one of you, now and always, is my humble prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.