

“Hearken unto the Counsels of God”

CECIL O. SAMUELSON

Graduates, families, brothers, sisters, guests, and friends, as we offer our hearty congratulations and commendations on this special day to those of you we honor in these exercises, I also want to add a few words of counsel and even caution. Before doing so, I wish to exert my special privilege in extending our warm welcome and greeting to all of you in attendance today. You honor us with your presence.

Each graduating class at BYU possesses some significant commonalities with past graduating classes but also some characteristics that make it remarkable in its own right. Let me mention some aggregate statistics you might find interesting.

As is usually the case, our 6,276 graduates come from all 50 states, five U.S. territories, and 66 other nations. About 30 percent hail from Utah, 13 percent are from California, and 5 percent come from the state of Washington. Other western states are close behind with significant representation. Almost a quarter of the graduates are from the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences and more than a tenth each come from the College of Humanities and the Marriott School of Management.

Happily, over half of the individuals in the graduating class are already married, and I'm

told the percentage will rise significantly in the days and weeks ahead. About a quarter of the undergraduate degree recipients attended other institutions of higher learning prior to transferring to BYU. Almost half of the graduate degree recipients attended other colleges or universities before enrolling at BYU.

Our youngest graduate today is 18 years of age, and the oldest is my age. Both of them, like all of our graduates, have interesting stories that have brought them to this important milestone. Many of our graduates have served missions, some have served with distinction in the military, some have delayed their studies for a season to rear children and support spouses, and some have finished their work in less than four years. All have clearly qualified for the degrees that will be awarded today.

Given the clear direction of our board of trustees that BYU be primarily an undergraduate teaching institution, it is interesting to see that a large number from our graduating classes go on for additional education and training at some of the other fine universities in the United States and a few in other countries

Cecil O. Samuelson was president of Brigham Young University when this commencement address was given on 24 April 2008.

as well. For several years BYU has ranked near tenth place among the more than 4,200 baccalaureate degree-granting institutions in this country for producing students who go on to earn doctorates. We are also near the very top in producing successful candidates for graduate professional schools such as dentistry, law, and medicine.

Another characteristic that is always impressive to those who become familiar with our graduates is that three-fourths of them have functional facility with a second language. Almost half of our graduates have lived outside of the U.S. for at least one year, with many living abroad longer due to their service as missionaries. The involvement of our students in various kinds of community service and their success in competitions with students from other institutions in the arts, academics, and athletics has likewise been noteworthy and commendable.

With all of the wonderful occurrences and experiences of the recent academic year, we also note with great tenderness the recent passing of our beloved prophet and leader President Gordon B. Hinckley. We will ever be grateful for his love and great influence on this campus and on its students, staff, and faculty. We likewise express our deep affection and respect for President Thomas S. Monson, who, as president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also serves as chairman of the BYU Board of Trustees. He and his counselors and the other members of the board provide remarkable support, leadership, and direction to us, and we must always be grateful for the confidence they posit in each of us.

In a similar vein, we must never forget the faithful tithing payers all around the world who make it possible for the board of trustees to arrive at decisions regarding expenditures so that all we find here is accessible and available for us. I know that I express the gratitude of each student, graduate, faculty member, and others privileged to learn and serve at Brigham

Young University. We also express appreciation to the other generous donors and benefactors for their very significant contributions of great variety as well.

And now, if I may, let me add to my congratulations and commendations just a few words of counsel and caution. I do so not to detract from the great happiness and sense of relief of the occasion but hopefully to arm you further for the real success that is within your grasp if you do not allow yourselves to be distracted from the things of greatest importance in your lives.

Today and tomorrow we will appropriately focus in large part on your academic achievements and milestones. Individually and as a group you have done very well and in the eyes of the world will be considered well trained and even well educated. This is as it should be. I am confident, however, that almost all of you understand that academic achievement is only part of the BYU equation.

You have been given tremendous opportunities for a wide variety of experiences that are also spiritually strengthening. You have met the academic requirements in religious education that are unique to our Church schools. You have encountered great faculty members and fellow students in all of your classes who have not only encouraged the further development of your testimonies but have also demonstrated their own faith in their interactions with you.

Most of you have participated in student wards and stakes, and all of you have been part of congregations that have provided opportunities for service to others and to God. You have been exposed to prophets and apostles and others of great faith who have delivered instructive and inspirational devotional and forum addresses.

My list could go on, but the central point is that your BYU education has been much, much more than the mastery of academic subjects or preparation for further education or

employment in the workplace, as important as these are. You have been given the extraordinary and unique opportunity to prepare for devoted discipleship and competent leadership to assist you in your families, communities, and professions as well as in your primary quest to obtain eternal life.

As I think about you and our entire BYU community (including myself), the counsel and caution of Father Lehi's son Jacob constantly rings in my heart and head: "But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God" (2 Nephi 9:29). Your scholastic attainments at BYU are "good," to use the scriptural word, but the prophetic qualifier "if they hearken unto the counsels of God" is essential. In other words, for your learning in your discipline and even in your gospel studies to be "good," you must always listen to and obey the counsel of your Heavenly Father and His duly constituted servants.

Consider these chilling words of caution and warning. I think they would qualify for what Elder Neal A. Maxwell used to describe as "wintry doctrine":

But wo unto him that has the law given [I would judge that a BYU graduate has received the "law"], yea, that has all the commandments of God, like unto us, and that transgresseth them, and that wasteth the days of his probation, for awful is his state!

O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish. [2 Nephi 9:27–28]

And then comes the wonderful assurance with the qualification already mentioned: "But

to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God."

Jacob's brother Nephi was also concerned about these same issues and about us. In speaking of those who "are lifted up in the pride of their [own] eyes" and have created their own "stumbling block[s]" that have led them away from the truth, listen to 2 Nephi 26:20 with its interesting description of them and what must not happen to any of us: They "preach up unto themselves their own wisdom and their own learning" rather than "hearken[ing] unto the counsels of God."

As you leave BYU—some for a season and some perhaps forever—it is our hope and prayer that you will leave part of your heart here, just as we hope you will take part of BYU with you. This happens in many ways. We hope and expect you will never be the same because of what you have learned "by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118, 109:7) and what you have become while you were a student at BYU.

We hope you will remember with great fondness your classmates, roommates, ward members, teachers, Church leaders, and your many friends and associates. We hope you will take with you the high standards of academic rigor and integrity you have honed and learned while here just as you have strengthened, enhanced, and solidified your testimonies of the Father and the Son, of the Restoration of the gospel in our day, and of the great potential you have, together with your family—including for many of you the new family you will help create in the future—of achieving eternal life in the presence of Heavenly Father and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. When you do this, remembering always to "hearken unto the counsels of God," you will represent your families, BYU, and the Lord's Church with distinction. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.