

Getting and Staying Connected

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Dear brothers and sisters, it is an honor to accompany you this afternoon in these graduation ceremonies. This is a great day! It is a hinge point in your lives for you graduates. I join with your family members and friends and of course with the administration, faculty, and staff of Brigham Young University in congratulating you for the mighty accomplishment that this day acknowledges. We recognize the time, toil, and commitment your efforts have required. We hope you feel the satisfaction of having done something hard, something worth doing, and something that has made more of you than you were when you first entered a classroom here a few years ago.

Kathy and I have seven children, five of whom graduated from BYU, as did two sons-in-law and two daughters-in-law. Your graduating class includes our nephew, who now goes on to dental school. It also includes the daughter and son-in-law of one of my former law partners from California. My secretary's son and daughter-in-law are graduating today, as are the children of cousins, friends, and relatives. These connections make today even more special and memorable for us. We are

very happy for each of you and express our personal congratulations to them and to you as we honor all of you.

Like many of you, I do most of my reading of current events, the news, and commentary about the news online. Every morning I read from several news sources and sometimes watch news stories online. I found that doing so was helpful professionally as a lawyer, but it has been essential in my Church service as well. This reading frequently leads me to ideas that can be used to illustrate gospel principles in sermons, usually by providing instructive examples.

Some of the examples are about good and brave people doing noble or courageous things. They are stories that inspire. Other news accounts fall in the opposite category. They also have value.

This afternoon I want to share with you something other than a news story that I saw

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online. It was an advertisement. As you well know, in order to access some news stories online, we sometimes first have to watch short advertisements. Most of you have seen your share of such advertisements. You also know that you have to see some advertisements multiple times before they are replaced by new ones.

A recent advertisement I saw a few times caught my attention. It was an ad for a smart-phone, and it showed a group of twenty-somethings out on the town at night. They looked happy as they moved across the screen. They were laughing and talking together in a close circle of friendship. As I recall, there was no cell phone actually in view. Instead, the narrator praised the virtues of staying connected. I inferred, as I think it was intended I would, that these young people were having a terrific time together because their phones connected them to each other in some almost magical way. Had they not had their phones, their happy night just wouldn't have been the same. I am confident that is what I was supposed to conclude. The advertisement ended with another image: a close-up of an attractive young woman looking intently at her phone with a slight sort-of Mona Lisa smile and a knowing, purposeful, confident look on her face.

I thought the message this advertisement conveyed was subtle and fascinating: Purchase this product and you too will be "connected." You will be young, attractive, socially accepted, up-to-date, and in charge of your life. Things will be good. You will be happy, have friends, and have fun.

I wondered, after seeing the ad a few times, does all of that really come from owning the right smartphone? I thought about how real connection has so much more weight and substance than what a cell phone offers, no matter how smart it is. Real interpersonal connection is so much more transcendent than the video of a carefree night on the town suggests.

Nevertheless, the power of the advertisement is that it subtly nudges against eternal truths.

There can be, after all, real value in being connected. All of our human interactions in one way or another are connections. Some are fleeting and less consequential, and some become the very substance of eternity and matter immensely, now and forever. Along the spectrum between these two ends are many other kinds of relationships. Let me mention a few thoughts about connections for your consideration.

First, nearly all of you who graduate today are intimately connected to people who over a lifetime helped you qualify to attend BYU. These connections include your parents, grandparents, and other family members. In many cases they also provided the financial wherewithal for you to stay here and the emotional support that helped you succeed. You owe them so much more gratitude than a few words from any of us will capture this afternoon.

At the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, the Prophet Joseph Smith offered what he described as a revealed prayer. He prayed for Church leaders and their families, including those whom he called their "immediate connections."¹ That same sort of prayer is appropriate for you to offer today for your immediate connections. We hope that you will thank them as well, especially by the way you live.

John the Beloved wrote, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth."² Your lifelong faithfulness and devotion to the Savior and His restored Church will be the highest demonstration of gratitude that you can offer to your parents.

Second, a number of you have formed your own families while you have been at BYU, connecting profoundly and eternally with each other. Nothing else that you did while you were here, no matter what degrees or academic distinctions you achieved, is more valuable to you than this eternal connection. Your happiness

and growth in this life and your opportunities for eternity hereafter are fundamentally linked to this most “immediate” of all connections.

Your most important mortal responsibility will be to build and nurture this young relationship into a connection that is qualified by its virtues and character to be eternal. As you both are faithful, the love you have experienced thus far will increase in beauty, significance, and substance. If you will both pay the price of becoming devoted to heaven and to each other as God intends, then your connection will be the flower and fruit of your lives.

Third, some of you became parents during your time here at BYU. Your children are connected to you and you to them in ways you have to experience as parents to understand. As the years go by, your connection to your progeny will become ever more precious and meaningful. Your education and experience at BYU have expanded your capacity to offer your children an opportunity to thrive in this life. Your time here enriched you by providing you with a deeper storehouse from which to draw truth and wisdom as you raise your children. You will find that you will continue to be parents for your children long after they have moved on with their own marriages and families. Your connection to these children is clearly an eternal one.

Fourth, you have also consciously—or perhaps unconsciously—become more closely connected to the Church and its members worldwide. The Church’s financial and leadership investment in BYU is staggering. The expense of operating BYU far exceeds the tuition paid for your education. You literally stand on the shoulders of faithful members who pay their tithing in full confidence that, among many other things, worthy and honorable Latter-day Saint students will benefit from their faithful financial obedience.

The cost of your education here was subsidized by the tithing of a few members with

extensive bank accounts, but it was also aided by some both here and abroad who literally or figuratively keep their limited savings under their mattresses. Tithing is paid by those who have never dreamed of being able to attend BYU and by others who dream about it but for whom for many reasons the dream will never be realized. Saints around the world selflessly pay tithes so that you—people they have never met and will never know—can attend BYU. Their continuing obedience and generosity are dependable and allow for the Church to maintain BYU and her sister organizations. You are connected to all of these Saints as their beneficiaries.

Fifth, I believe you now have a duty to stay connected to BYU. The alumni association’s motto is “Connected for Good.” Your education enables you to help BYU go forward in good ways. The effort you make to repay the blessing you have received will never compensate the Church or the Lord for the good to which you have been exposed and connected at BYU. But it won’t hurt you to try to do so.

Some of you may earn sufficient income to make major philanthropic gifts to the university in addition to your tithes. Please consider doing so, using wisdom and acting in accordance with your circumstances. The blessings you have been given and will be given will in turn bless many others in unforeseeable ways. Staying connected to BYU for good means staying close enough to be useful for the long run, doing all the good you can to promote the future of this great institution.

Sixth, I hope as well that you will stay connected in appropriate ways with friends, classmates, and professors from BYU. The world is small, especially in the Church, and your friendships can be perpetuated and enhanced as the years go by. Those connections will circle around over the years to bless and help you in happy, righteous ways. For example, some of my present quorum associates in Church service met each other as

roommates at BYU and have friendships that extend back for decades.

In these regards, however, three brief reminders seem important. Just as there are connections that should be strengthened, there are others that should be relegated to history. Some of you had dating connections during your years here that did not result in marriage, and either you or your former interest married someone else. If so, wisdom suggests that you disconnect from that association. Staying in touch with each other electronically or otherwise after eternal covenants or connections have been made is spiritually unwise and unfortunately all too often dangerous because it permits or encourages familiarity to exist when such closeness is no longer appropriate. Don't do anything that exposes your own or someone else's eternal connection to a spouse to hazards in any way. In matters of such consequence, there is no room for error.

A similar warning should be sounded about the perils of pornography. Though Church leaders continually fire off warning flares about the seriousness of this selfish and gullible sin, too many still fail to make the lasting behavioral change required. The transgression is serious enough by itself, and the risk of greater evil it entails is real. Any closeness to this temptation should be abruptly disconnected and efforts should be focused on seeking help from Church leaders and through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

A few of you may have run into some who have ceased to hold fast to the iron rod, have wandered off the strait and narrow path, and have become lost. They started sometimes with online tours of the territory of the faithless. This indiscretion is often accompanied by failing to earnestly study the Book of Mormon every day and by the companion problem of gradually becoming lax in keeping other commandments. This sometimes leads to listening and then hearkening to those who mock the Church, its leaders, or its history.

The faithless often promote themselves as the wise who can rescue the rest of us from our naïveté. One does not need to listen to assertive apostates for long to see the parallels between them and the Korihors, Nehors, and Sherems of the Book of Mormon. We should disconnect, immediately and completely, from listening to the proselytizing efforts of those who have lost their faith and instead reconnect promptly with the Holy Spirit.

The adversary sees spiritual apathy and half-hearted obedience as opportunities to encircle us with his chains and bind us, and he hopes to destroy us. We escape his chains as we voluntarily choose to bind ourselves instead to God. In what at first may seem ironic, our choosing to bind or connect with heaven frees and empowers us to become all that we possibly can in this life and the next through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

The word *connect* comes from the Latin root *connectere*, meaning "to bind." As I watched that smartphone advertisement about connecting with friends, my recurring thought was that the connection—the binding—that matters most is the one we have with God. We connect with God most securely by covenant. When we are baptized we covenant to keep the commandments, to take upon us the name of Christ, and to always remember Him. We are promised that if we do so, we will always have His Spirit to be with us. We renew and recommit ourselves to this covenant every Sunday when we partake of the sacrament.

Additional covenants made by receiving the priesthood and in the temples of God bind us ever more closely to Him. These covenantal connections to Him become the guideposts for our lives. They help us measure where we are on the strait and narrow path. They lead us to the fruit of the Atonement—forgiveness, peace of conscience, and love. They help us stay worthy to enjoy the blessings of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever we do that may tend to weaken our connection—our binding—with heaven

should be assessed with wariness. Everything we do that tends to reinforce faith and promotes keeping our covenants should be embraced. Our connection with heaven is the most valuable blessing we have and the most important one we can secure. It strengthens every other worthy connection in our lives.

You have had a wonderful opportunity at BYU to receive both a full, broad academic program and the blessing to connect to God. There is nowhere else that you can find a believing student body studying such diverse subjects as you can here. There is nowhere else you can find so many eminently qualified professors who are faithful believers. With the exception of associated Church schools, there is nowhere else you can find as rich an opportunity to learn whatever it is you studied while looking through the lens of belief and faith.

All of this afforded you a rich opportunity to connect with heaven. It offered you a time in which you could deepen discipleship and refine covenant keeping. If your time here led to such a result while gaining academic excellence, your time was well spent. If your experience here did not further establish such a connection—a closer binding between you and God—then perhaps today’s hinge point in your life’s journey is the time to take steps

to ensure that your focus in life is where it should be.

A lawyer once asked the Savior:

Master, which is the great commandment in the law?

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment.

And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.³

When we love God, we become truly connected to Him. When we love our neighbor, we become truly connected to him or her. As we keep the commandments of God, we show our love for God. As we serve one another, we show our love for our neighbor. The lasting value of your education at Brigham Young University is that it enhanced your capacity to do both. May you and we all make it our purpose to be worthily connected to God and to each other I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. D&C 109:70, 71, 72.
2. 3 John 1:4.
3. Matthew 22:36–39.