

Appropriate Zeal

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As is always the case at this wonderful time of year, I have the great privilege and pleasure of welcoming you to a new semester at Brigham Young University. I hope and trust you have had productive summer months and now begin this academic year full of enthusiasm, optimism, energy, and commitment to and for the opportunities and tasks ahead. I anticipate you are excited to be here because there is much about which to be energized and encouraged this fall term at BYU. More so than ever before, there are many who would love to be in your positions who are not able to be so.

For some months I have been pondering about my message to you today. In the years that we have occupied these positions, Sister Samuelson and I have had the high honor of addressing the campus community in devotionals twice a year. While we stand before you in this setting typically at the beginning of each fall and winter semester, we tend to think and pray about what we should discuss with you almost constantly. And it is not rare that someone might feel impressed to offer counsel as to what we might say next or what we should have said today or last winter. In all candor, we need all the help we can get, but we give highest priority to seeking the guidance of the Holy

Ghost in what we consider in these precious moments we have with you.

Last spring—in the context of a number of opportunities, concerns, and issues we were facing here at BYU—I read, as I have many times over the years, of a Book of Mormon personality who has seemed largely a peripheral figure. I speak of the Nephite Zeniff. As I tried to “liken all scriptures” unto myself, as we are counseled by Nephi (1 Nephi 19:23), I perceived perhaps for the first time some interesting parallels or character traits that I also observe in our community and even in myself from time to time. The applications are many, and I will have time for only a few that seem particularly pertinent on this occasion.

While I will leave the detailed study of Zeniff, his times, and circumstances to you, I need to summarize briefly in order to provide further context to what I feel to comment about today. You will recall that Zeniff’s son, King Noah, and his grandson, King Limhi, were both more prominent in Book of Mormon history than was he. Zeniff lived roughly 400

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years after Father Lehi and his people arrived in the promised land. Because of the wars and struggles between the Nephites and the Lamanites, the Nephites had been driven from their first ancestral lands in the new world and were primarily located in a place called Zarahemla. Zeniff had been a participant with a group of Nephites who were committed to taking back or reestablishing the Nephite nation in their initial place of residence. Not everyone shared his politics or his priorities, and, in fact, this issue led to considerable conflict and carnage among the Nephites themselves.

Now to the central point of this account. After describing the horrible contention and bloodshed these disagreements engendered, Zeniff said:

I being over-zealous to inherit the land of our fathers, collected as many as were desirous to go up to possess the land, and started again on our journey into the wilderness to go up to the land; but we were smitten with famine and sore afflictions; for we were slow to remember the Lord our God. [Mosiah 9:3; emphasis added]

To my knowledge, there is only one other place in the scriptures where the term *over-zealous* is found. This is where the Book of Mormon editor is describing the man Zeniff (see Mosiah 7:21) and comments that because he was overzealous, he allowed himself to be deceived by wicked King Laman, which led to the captivity, suffering, and disadvantage of the group of people he led. Earlier in the chronology of the Book of Mormon, Zeniff is also described as “a strong and mighty man, and a stiffnecked man” (see Omni 1:28).

It apparently was not necessarily so that Zeniff was inherently wicked or intentionally unwise, but he was *overzealous*. It is also clear that his misplaced zeal led to other poor decisions that not only affected him personally in adverse ways but also caused tremendous

difficulties for others under his influence. It didn’t help that he was also stiff-necked, which means that he was haughty and stubborn too. Can you see any potential dangers in a man who is strong, forceful, passionate, enthusiastic, stubborn, full of himself, and overzealous too? I know that all of you can perceive these interesting traits or character flaws in others, but do they ever creep into your own persona as well? I hope that is something we all try to consider at least a little, and correct if necessary, on a regular basis.

Now let me be clear. We are in favor of correctly focused zeal. We admire courageous leaders and those who are willing to sacrifice or stand for what they know is right. The scriptures are replete with references to *zeal*, and the word is often attached to Deity. Without zeal and other associated virtues in courageous leaders and followers of previous days, we would not have this nation or this university, the gospel would not have been restored, and many other events of extreme importance would not have happened.

Likewise, we abhor slothful behavior and thinking, which are antithetical to righteous and appropriate zeal. The Book of Mormon prophet Jacob described the failings of those he knew about who missed “the mark” or appropriate target of concern (Jacob 4:14).

Thus we must be careful that we do not overdo or underdo any of the important things that demand and deserve our attention. While there are many applications of these principles that we might profitably address, I will mention only a few that have fairly wide applicability in our campus community and beyond. You will be able to think of additional themes and examples, and I suggest you tailor a list that best meets your own concerns, potential weaknesses or strengths, and most important priorities.

Because of the season, I think of two areas in which examples of the extreme are quite prevalent. I speak, of course, of politics and

sports. In the political arena, we are in an election year, and emotions are already beginning to be evident with strong opinions, advocacy, and criticism rampant among us. I encourage you to become informed, to register to vote if you are eligible and have not done so, and to vote your educated conscience on Election Day. Participate in the process as your time and inclinations allow, but please be sure to be considerate of other opinions, people, and perspectives. Please also remember that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Brigham Young University are firm in our positions about protecting our institutional political neutrality.

Likewise, we are now in football season and will have almost continuous and various athletic contests during the entire school year. While most of our students and community are exemplary in their sportsmanship, we as a group of avid boosters can do better and must do better in respecting our opponents and, frankly, ourselves by acting the way representatives of Brigham Young University should act.

We applaud your enthusiasm, and our student athletes recognize and appreciate your support. However, in both athletics and politics we see far too many examples of overzealous behavior, and I caution and admonish you to help solve the problems and not be the creators or promoters of offensive and boorish behavior. It doesn't matter what others do. Their poor judgments or actions do not justify imitation. They certainly do not justify acting or behaving in unseemly ways by those who have made the commitments that members of this community have made. I think I don't need to say more about these matters today, but I invite your help and support in improving our conduct and that of others. In the days ahead, the report and recommendations of the BYU Presidential Commission on sportsmanship will be released. I endorse both the work and

the suggestions of this important group chosen broadly from across our community.

In a similar vein, we occasionally witness among us those who give counsel or criticism when they themselves do not have all the facts or the responsibility to so comment. Inappropriate observations about the personal choices of others when differing from their own preferences unfortunately are not restricted to just politics and athletics. Intensely personal decisions about whom to marry, when to have children if married (as if every couple can automatically cause these things to happen on their own timetable—they cannot!), opinions about proper and improper majors or career choices for women or men, and other intrusive verbal or behavioral assaults should never be heard or found in the BYU community. Happily, they are rare, but when they do happen, they are extremely hurtful. Above all, none should ever attempt to impose guilt or distress upon another by being overzealous in interpreting the directions and counsel of the living prophets. The Brethren are extremely careful and clear about what they say and mean, and we should follow their example.

I like the response of the prophet Alma when asked a question by his son. Note that Alma didn't say, "I don't have an opinion." Rather, this was his response: "Now these mysteries are not yet fully made known unto me; therefore I shall forbear" (Alma 37:11). We all should forbear more often and more thoughtfully.

I also do need to offer counsel about keeping your zeal in proper boundaries with respect to some other matters such as your hobbies, your creativity, and even your studies. As you know, or are now finding out firsthand, BYU is a very no-nonsense place when it comes to scholarship and academic activities, even though we also really know how to have appropriate fun. All of you are bright and able or you would not have been invited to enroll. All of you will need to study hard to succeed and will need

to take your course work and other academic endeavors very seriously. But even here you can become overzealous and miss the mark if you are not careful.

There are those who believe some come to BYU just to socialize or to meet others with similar values and goals and hopefully to find an eventual eternal companion. While this is not the only reason for attending BYU or even perhaps your primary motivation in coming here, please do not wait until you have ordered your cap and gown as you anticipate your pending graduation to do all you can to meet and get to know people with whom you might wish to spend your lives in creating a new eternal family together. If finding a mate is your only concern, BYU is the wrong place for you. But if you leave BYU without doing all you can to fulfill this important obligation in Heavenly Father's plan, you will have missed a great opportunity and may pay a very heavy price in the future.

Make no mistake, even with the best of intentions and efforts, some of you will likely not find that special someone while you are here. If that is the case and you have done your best, I promise you that heaven will help you and cause it to happen, even if it takes a very long time and extends beyond your mortal probation. Just be sure that you are doing what you can and should in all that you do here. Hanging out occasionally may be fine, but appropriate dating at the right time and in the right way is very important.

On a different topic but with the same theme, let me speak candidly with you about the tremendous opportunities you have before you at BYU to grow in the gospel as well as to mature in your academic specialty and general education. I regularly meet students who are so focused on gaining a specific credential, on getting admission to a particular professional school or graduate program, or on receiving well-earned distinction at the time of graduation that they fail to have the full experience of

participating in their student wards and stakes and in the spiritually strengthening activities and events on campus such as these devotionals. I can promise you that if you will plan your time, discipline your activities, and set your priorities properly, you will grow and develop in all spheres of your lives in ways that would not be possible elsewhere. You need to be intellectually stretched but also spiritually strengthened.

As I visit in various stakes on assignment around the world, I frequently meet Church leaders who express gratitude for three things: First, that they had the opportunity to meet their eternal companion at BYU; second, that they learned important lessons in Church administration and leadership in their student wards; and third—often mentioned third—that they received a wonderful education that has prepared them well for the careers they are pursuing. Be zealous in all of the good things your BYU experience offers you but avoid being overzealous in any one dimension that will lead you to being restrictive, confused, and misled in your quest to achieve all that you might gain here at BYU. Being overzealous will also cause you to miss opportunities to be of service to others in ways that might have been very beneficial to all involved while you are at BYU as well as limit your capacities for significant future service throughout your lives.

The Lord is aware of the tendency of the natural man and natural woman in all of us to be overzealous about some things and as a result be slothful and neglectful about others. As I conclude, let me turn to the scriptures for some important counsel.

First, from the concluding instruction of King Benjamin in his great benedictory address: He had spoken directly and clearly to his people about their tremendous responsibilities in living the gospel as he had taught it. He saw that they were anxious to be not only good and obedient but to do everything their prophet-king and the Lord asked of them.

Think carefully and invite the Spirit to teach you while you consider these words:

And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man [or a woman] should run faster than he has strength. And again, it is expedient that he should be diligent, that thereby he might win the prize; therefore, all things must be done in order. [Mosiah 4:27]

Second, from the counsel of the Lord to the Prophet Joseph Smith after Joseph had made a very serious mistake when he was close to the age of most of you: You recall that while in the process of translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph let Martin Harris temporarily take 116 pages of the manuscript that were subsequently lost. Because of this terrible error, Joseph lost his gift of translation for a season, and he was terribly depressed and disappointed in the situation. After a period of repentance, the gift to translate was restored to young Joseph, and he was admonished to finish the work that he had been given to do. It was at this time that the Lord gave this wonderful tutorial that I likewise share with you:

Do not run faster or labor more than you have strength and means provided to enable you to translate; but be diligent unto the end. [D&C 10:4]

My counsel to you, my dear young friends, as you embark on this very important new academic semester, is to be clear in your priorities, in your understanding, in your faith, and in all your endeavors. Don't be like Zeniff, overzealous and stiff-necked. Be like King Benjamin, who received his message from an angel, and Joseph Smith, who was taught directly by the Lord.

Do what you do with wisdom and order. Do not run faster or labor more than you have strength and means, but be diligent always.

Thanks be to God our Heavenly Father and to His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, for all Their blessings, and among the most precious currently is the privilege of being at Brigham Young University. That we might all demonstrate our love and appreciation for what we have and the possibilities before us I pray. God does live and we are part of His great work. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.