

Pastry, Chalk Circles, and Other Words to Live By: A Guide to Keeping Commitments

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When I first came to this land, I quickly learned that a number of everyday words had different meanings here. Biscuits became cookies, petrol became gas, and chips became fries. It was through my work with a group of wonderful student employees in the tutoring program that I was introduced to a new meaning of the word *flaky*. Previously I had only come across this word in connection with the qualities of pastry or piecrust. But my student employees used it to describe a fellow student. They said that the student had not shown up for a meeting because he was flaky. When I asked for clarification about this use of the word, they explained that being flaky meant someone was unreliable and did not keep their commitments.

We have all observed flakiness in some form or other, whether it's when someone gets stood up for a date, when someone takes a different job two weeks after committing to work for a whole semester, or when someone does not choose to keep sacred covenants and chooses a path different from the one the Savior would have us choose. Whatever the degree of flakiness, any commitment that is broken results in remorse. Flakiness is the antithesis of commitment.

Commitment, in its most basic form, is doing what you say you will do. Elder F. Burton Howard said of commitment:

*The Church does have many needs, and one of them is for more people who will just do what they have agreed to do. People who will show up for work and stay all day; who will quietly, patiently, and consistently do what they have agreed to do—for as long as it takes—and who will not stop until they have finished. [“Commitment,” *Ensign*, May 1996, 27–28]*

Whether your commitments are in the form of promises, pledges, covenants, callings, contracts, or your word of honor, they must be kept. Whether they are commitments that are spiritual in nature, legal contracts, or seemingly trivial temporal things, they must be kept. Karl G. Maeser's statement about chalk circles demonstrates the importance of keeping our commitments well. He said:

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I have been asked what I mean by word of honor. I will tell you. Place me behind prison walls—walls of stone ever so high, ever so thick, reaching ever so far into the ground—there is a possibility that in some way or another I may be able to escape, but stand me on that floor and draw a chalk line around me and have me give my word of honor never to cross it. Can I get out of that circle? No, never! I'd die first! [In Alma P. Burton, *Karl G. Maeser: Mormon Educator* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953), 71]

In an increasingly flaky and crusty world, it seems that the word *commitment* has been progressively modified so that in many contexts its meaning no longer resembles what it used to. We hear people talk of casual commitments, partial commitments, or half-hearted commitments. But anything less than complete, absolute, or total commitment is as bad as no commitment at all. Elder Theodore M. Burton said:

When I speak then of total commitment, I do not refer to a momentary dedication. . . . I refer to a daily or continuing spirit of devotion and dedication which comes from keeping all the commandments of God every day. ["The Need for Total Commitment," *Ensign*, January 1974, 115]

Achieving total commitment may seem daunting. Today I would like to focus on some basic principles that may help us to avoid flakiness (outside of the kitchen). I will discuss six guidelines that I hope will be both useful and inspirational to you as you strive to keep your commitments in all areas of your life.

1. Know Your Commitments

The first guideline is *know which commitments you have made*. It goes without saying that commitments are of particular importance to us, as we are a covenant people. Living the gospel requires that we make and keep covenants and commitments.

A faculty friend of mine recently told me that she had asked her class to list the commitments they had made. She was surprised when she was met with blank stares and silence. The students needed help in articulating the commitments they had made. It is difficult to think about keeping commitments if you aren't really sure what you have committed to.

She posed the question again and then prompted the students by saying, "Okay, let's start with baptismal covenants." Then they began to realize that we have many commitments in common.

We have committed to take upon us Christ's name. This should completely change every thought we have and every action we take. We recommit every Sunday, through the ordinance of the sacrament, to always remember Him. This commitment should translate into powerful righteous behaviors in our life. As we attend the temple, we make additional covenants to do the Lord's will and to increase our ability to make and keep sacred commitments.

At Brigham Young University we commit to keep the Honor Code. Most often we hear about aspects of the Honor Code such as dress and grooming standards, chastity, and integrity. One important feature of the Honor Code that is often overlooked is the promise to help others keep their commitment to the Honor Code as well. Support for others who are also trying to keep the Honor Code begins with our personal example and keeping our own commitments. I recently heard of a female student who consistently wore short shorts in her physical education class. Another student in the class asked her if she would like to borrow some longer, knee-length shorts, and the student realized that she needed to wear longer shorts and comply with the dress and grooming standard. Helping our peers to keep their Honor Code commitments should always be accomplished in a spirit of love and kindness.

Many of us have committed to serve in Church callings in our various wards and stakes. Don't take these commitments lightly. The BYU wards and stakes are the training ground for future Church leaders. Committing to do home and visiting teaching now will prepare you and enable you to become a valuable and powerful instrument in the Lord's hands.

Other commitments you may have chosen to make include attending the weekly devotional in the Marriott Center, being on time for the 8:00 a.m. class you elected to take, reading the Book of Mormon daily, or praying morning and night.

Know which commitments you have made and reflect upon them often. Ask the Lord to help you keep them in the forefront of your mind. This will help you to remember both your commitments and the Lord more readily.

2. Decide Now

Once we know what our commitments are, we need to keep them by following the second point: *decide now*. Increasingly I hear from people who are seeking to justify breaking a commitment. They will say, "I have to do what is right for me" or "I'm just too tired" or "It's just not working out for me" and, especially, "I am just too busy." It's bad enough when such rationalizations are used when temporal commitments are broken, but we must not be fooled into thinking we can disregard our promises to the Lord so casually. We must decide now to keep our commitments. Then, when faced with a temptation or an opportunity to compromise, we will not waver, because the decision has already been made. A covenant people must not waver.

Elder Richard G. Scott counseled us to make our commitment keeping automatic. He said:

I commend you who are automatic, who have committed to be true to the Lord and to live by faith when you cannot see the end from the beginning.

[*"Making the Right Decisions," Ensign, May 1991, 34*]

Decide now that you will keep your commitments so that when challenges arise, you will continue steadfast, without hesitation. That is not to imply that you are blindly following; rather, it means that you have already done the important thinking, soul searching, and praying to allow you to respond in this manner.

Great strength comes from commitments that are made well in advance. In chapter 14 of Luke we can read about one of the numerous occasions when the Savior was teaching His disciples. He was constantly trying to develop commitment patterns in them and strengthen them because He knew what trials and challenges they would have to face after He was gone. Verse 28 of the Joseph Smith Translation reads, "Settle this in your hearts, that ye will do the things which I shall teach, and command you." The Savior was encouraging His disciples to decide now. We know the disciples were not strangers to deciding "now," based on their response to Jesus when He called them to the work: they left their fishing nets immediately and followed Him.

My husband and I are committed to raising our children in the gospel, and part of that commitment involves holding family home evening. We have already decided that we will have family home evening every Monday night. So when our four-year-old, William, inevitably answers the call to come to family home evening with the suggestion "Let's play light sabers instead," we are not swayed or moved because we have already decided to have family home evening.

Elder M. Russell Ballard said, "Have you made the commitment to do anything the Lord asks, and are you disciplined enough to fulfill that commitment, even at a time that may not be particularly opportune or pleasant?" (*"The Power of Commitment," New Era, November*

1989, 6). Commitment is never to be postponed for convenience or pleasure. It is easier to keep commitments when we have decided before we reach the crisis point or when the critical mass of peer pressure occurs.

3. Follow the Master

The scriptures are replete with examples of ancient prophets and leaders who kept their commitments in the face of great adversity and trials. Nephi built a ship without any prior shipbuilding experience because he had committed to do whatever the Lord asked of him. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies, parents of the 2,000 stripling warriors, kept their commitments although it meant sending their sons to battle. Joshua declared that he and his family were committed to serving the Lord in spite of what others thought. The sons of Mosiah were committed to preaching the gospel to the Lamanites even though it was dangerous work. Joseph resisted the advances of Potiphar's wife and kept himself morally clean even though it meant being thrown into prison.

The quintessential example of commitment, however, is our Savior, Jesus Christ. This presents our third point, which is *follow the Master*. His devotion to His Father was perfect and complete, and He was totally committed to doing the Father's will in all things. President Howard W. Hunter said:

We must keep the commandments of our Lord. If we can pattern our life after the Master, and take His teaching and example as the supreme pattern for our own, we will not find it difficult to be temple worthy, to be consistent and loyal in every walk of life, for we will be committed to a single, sacred standard of conduct and belief. ["The Great Symbol of Our Membership," Ensign, October 1994, 5]

Early in 2002, my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. A few days later, my husband was also diagnosed with cancer.

These were some dark, difficult days for us as we tried to handle the challenges we faced. It would have been easy to do what Job was encouraged to do: curse God and die—ignoring our commitments to the Lord and others and wallowing in despair. However, even when our circumstances change, our commitment to the Lord must not change. There is no sliding scale. We cannot get a rain check or opt out from our commitments, even for a time. We must stay on track and be lifted up by Jesus' example. Putting our trust in the Lord and following His example is the best way to endure the trials of life and keep our commitments.

Even though our individual circumstances may be different, our commitments to the Lord are never situational; they do not change depending on the level of stress or joy we may be experiencing in our lives. Whether it is through defining moments of great trial or during seemingly subtle and quiet moments of reflection, making a commitment is a sacred act, an act that reflects what is divine in us. President Marion G. Romney said, "I . . . believe that the most effective way to get on course and to stay on course is to do as Jesus did: make a *total commitment*" ("Commitment and Dedication," *Ensign*, March 1983, 5; emphasis in original).

4. Set Realistic Goals

Once we are committed to following the Master, then a good way to make progress with our commitments is to *set realistic goals*. This is the fourth point. My sister volunteers at a family history center and has commented that many people are full of enthusiasm and energy when they come to search for their ancestors but leave disheartened because they are not able to identify all of their forebears in a single session. Their commitment to redeeming the dead can be relatively short-lived. Setting realistic goals assists in fulfilling commitments and thus enduring to the end. Whether we write a list of goals or keep them in our mind, we need

to set goals that are reasonable and achievable and that will help us to keep our commitments in the long run.

We often hear of people who have “commitment issues.” Generally, these commitment issues are in the context of a relationship, but it is an idea with broader application. Do we have spiritual commitment issues? With the Lord, all things are spiritual, thus there are no commitments that can be deemed “simply temporal.” When we keep our commitments, we draw closer to the Lord and come closer to becoming the person we need to be to endure through eternity. What may initially appear to be temporal is, in actuality, a training ground for things eternal. The companion of commitment keeping is enduring to the end. Because we are children of God, our commitments are lifelong commitments that stretch throughout eternity.

We would do well to remember what our beloved President Hinckley said:

Commitment . . . involves loyalty. It involves duty. It involves determination of objectives and the resolution to meet those objectives. It involves giving oneself without reservation to the accomplishment of a good and great purpose. [Gordon B. Hinckley, “Codes and Covenants,” BYU devotional, 18 October 1994]

“Loyalty,” “duty,” “determination”—truly these are words to live by.

5. Anticipate Opposition

Keeping our commitments is something we must do daily, no matter what the day might bring. President Howard W. Hunter said, “We should decide now, in the light of the morning, how we will act when the darkness of night and when the storms of temptation arrive” (“Commitment to God,” *Ensign*, November 1982, 58). Through both the clouds and the sunshine of life, we must be committed. The fifth point is *anticipate opposition*. Many will keep their commitments only until the clouds

appear, only until it becomes awkward, painful, expensive, unpopular, inconvenient, unfashionable, or politically incorrect. But we must be steadfast and immovable. Elder Marvin J. Ashton said:

A truly committed person does not falter in the face of adversity. Until one is committed, there is a chance to hesitate, to go off in another direction, or to be ineffective. Members within our ranks who are committed to living the gospel of Jesus Christ will not be affected by the rationale of hecklers. [“The Word Is Commitment,” *Ensign*, November 1983, 62]

As I was growing up, our family vacations were always to destinations where my parents were searching for their ancestors. A key feature of our holiday would be stopping at various cemeteries to look at the gravestones and search for names. Oftentimes the cemeteries were not well kept and were rather overgrown. We always carried a pair of garden shears and a wire brush in the trunk of our car so that we were ready to handle unruly overgrowth or headstones covered in moss and lichens. We anticipated that our passage around these cemeteries might not be smooth, and we armed ourselves with the tools to remedy this.

Another tool of opposition the adversary uses to try to get us to break our commitments is discouragement. Robert the Bruce, king of Scotland in the 13th century and an ancestor of mine, learned a great lesson after having been defeated in battle. While hiding from his enemies in a cave for several months and being at the lowest, darkest point in his life, he observed a spider trying to spin its web. The spider fell down again and again as it tried to construct its web, but it persevered and eventually succeeded. Bruce came to the realization that he must try, try again, and he too was eventually successful.

A further type of opposition we may experience is having friends who are lax or casual in

their approach to their commitments and minimize the extent of their obligations. Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

[Some] *members accept callings but not all of the accompanying responsibilities. . . .*

*While casual members are not unrighteous, they often avoid appearing to be too righteous by seeming less committed than they really are—an ironic form of hypocrisy. [“Settle This in Your Hearts,” *Ensign*, November 1992, 65, 66]*

The natural man is typically another opponent of commitment keeping, which is why our prophets and apostles speak so often of self-mastery. It takes great strength and discipline to be fully committed to all that is required, but the blessings of such an accomplishment are literally, seriously, and truly divine. Often we don’t need any more opposition than our own natural man to draw us away from things.

The cultural tides in our world run strongly against commitments of any kind. And too many of us are not fully committed to living all the commandments. Without a strong commitment to the Lord, we are more likely to have a lower level of commitment to ourselves and to others. Elder Russell M. Nelson noted, “Unfortunately, some souls make a covenant with God—signified by the sacred ordinance of baptism—without a heartfelt commitment to endure with Him” (“Endure and Be Lifted Up,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 71–72). When we put our whole heart into our commitments and covenants with God, the blessings will extend far beyond our spiritual selves and will strengthen all aspects of our lives.

6. Reap the Blessings

We are certain to *reap great blessings* as a result of keeping our commitments to the Lord. This is the sixth point. When my mother was baptized a member of the Church in 1964, she could not drive, and the local branch met in a drafty building across town. She had to take

several buses to get to and from church twice each Sunday. One cold, snowy night as she waited to catch the bus home, the missionaries passed by and told her that if she would keep her commitments to the Lord and continue to live the gospel, in the future it would be easier for her to get to church. Several years later, my mother passed her driving test. Soon afterward, the members worked hard to build a meetinghouse about a five-minute drive away from our home. Some years later, our ward house became the stake center. What a marvelous blessing it was for my mother to be able to get to ward and stake meetings so easily.

President Henry B. Eyring described great learners as people who keep commitments:

Any community functions better when people in it keep their promises to live up to its accepted standards. But for a learner and for a community of learners, that keeping of commitments has special significance. . . .

The Latter-day Saints who see themselves in all they do as children of God take naturally to making and keeping commitments. The plan of salvation is marked by covenants. We promise to obey commandments. In return, God promises blessings in this life and for eternity. He is exact in what he requires, and he is perfect in keeping his word. Because he loves us and because the purpose of the plan is to become like him, he requires exactness of us. And the promises he makes to us always include the power to grow in our capacity to keep covenants. He makes it possible for us to know his rules. When we try with all our hearts to meet his standards, he gives us the companionship of the Holy Ghost. That in turn both increases our power to keep commitments and to discern what is good and true. And that is the power to learn, both in our temporal studies and in the learning we need for eternity. [“A Child of God,” BYU devotional, 21 October 1997]

My mother was committed to raising her children in the gospel. Just one example of

her commitment to this ideal was an activity that happened every morning in our family. In the Ingram family we called it “morning service,” and it involved a hymn, a family prayer, and scripture reading at 7:30 a.m. each day. Regardless of what else might be going on that day, we always had morning service—every single day. I am ever grateful to my mother for her tenacity in keeping her commitment to raise up a righteous posterity even when her children were not always terribly congenial or happy about having to get out of bed for scripture study every morning. Her commitment has made a difference in my life—not least because I know the scriptures better because of morning service. Those blessings extend through future generations and continue to bless my family as I teach my children the gospel by reading the scriptures with them.

Words to Live By

With the holiday season already upon us, let’s keep the flakiness in the kitchen. With the vacation from school approaching, it is important to remember that we are never on vacation from our commitments to the Lord. As we take time to ponder the wonder of His

birth and life on earth, let us also review the commitments we have made and recommit to labor with greater zeal during the coming year. Let us be more fully aware of our commitments, decide now to keep them, follow the Master in our approach to our commitments, set realistic goals to help us fulfill our commitments, anticipate the opposition that will come, and reap the blessings, both temporal and eternal, that flow to those who faithfully keep commitments.

Commitment to God’s laws is the basis of peace in this life. President Howard W. Hunter said:

A successful life, the good life, the righteous Christian life requires something more than a contribution, though every contribution is valuable. Ultimately it requires commitment—whole-souled, deeply held, eternally cherished commitment to the principles we know to be true in the commandments God has given. [“Standing As Witnesses of God,” Ensign, May 1990, 62]

“Whole-souled, deeply held, eternally cherished”—these are words to live by. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.