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# Devotional

**“The Education Of Our Desires”**

**Neal A. Maxwell**

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I apologize for my voice--as I said in the prayer meeting, "If I've got to have President Kimball's voice, I'd like to have his virtues as well."

I hope you'll come to this place regularly. My wife and I first met at the Institute at the University of Utah. I can't promise you that you'll find your partner here, but I'm so glad I came to the Institute for all kinds of reasons. You'll be able to keep your learning and true perspective if you take advantage of the Institute course work; and I hope you'll come.

I thank the choir for that lovely number and the special preparation that it undoubtedly took. I'm grateful to be with you tonight and want you to know how highly I regard you.

It is, my brothers and sisters, your lot to strive to be true Latter-day Saints in a most unusual time in the earth's history. You have fallen into history at a time when (in the paraphrased words of Joseph Sobran, who has described our time so candidly and eloquently) the family is becoming a political subdivision of the state--with parents acting as minor civil servants. Yours, Sobran said, is a time when the dirty joke has ceased being a joke and has become a lifestyle--and likewise when the old sins are now the new rights.

To those perceptive observations, I now add my own comments. It is your lot to live in a secular society when there is tolerance for almost everything except that which is spiritual and when more and more individuals wrongly conclude that there are no absolute principles to be honored--only personal preferences to be obeyed!

Scripturally speaking, yours will also be a time when some people will rage against that which is good (see 2 Ne. 28:20) and will, for the praise of the world, even make war upon the saints. (See Rev. 13:7, 1 Ne. 13:9, D&C 76:29.) You will need to learn to love and to defend the Book of Mormon, which you can do by coming to the courses here. It is the only book, by the way, which people feel they need not read before they reject it. Moreover, amid cresting criticism, you will serve in the Church even as some nonmembers accept only those descriptions of the Church which are given by its dropouts. You will have demonstrated for you in so many ways how, regardless of his declared intentions, the adversary actually seeks the "misery of all mankind," the joyless herd! (2 Ne. 2:18.)

So be it. Collectively, you will handle such stern challenges because you are made of stern stuff. You will be able to manage "all these things," because you will have oil in your lamps. Unlike those in Jeremiah's time who were "not valiant for the truth upon the earth," you, collectively, will be anchored in and valiant for the truth. (Jer. 9:3.) Let our enemies, if they choose, mock or imitate the sacred temple rites, scorn the prophets, rejoice over the imperfections of leaders and members--such scoffing was foreseen; but you will be able to cling to the iron rod and pass through the mists successfully. (See 1 Ne. 8:27,28.)

Do not be surprised if, in order to strengthen the gospel grasp of its members, the Church increasingly focuses on teaching the basics of the gospel, such as the Plan of Salvation, concerning which the choir sang so beautifully tonight. Anciently, there was a time when one prophet found it necessary to leave off his administrative chores to go among the people to preach with his own mouth the gospel to them--in order to stir them up in remembrance of their duty. There was apparently no other way that the people might be reclaimed. (Alma 4:19.) Alma recognized how powerful the words of truth are when he said:

"... for the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just--yea, it had had a more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them--therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God." (Alma 31:5.) (See Alma 4:19.)

It will greatly help you, of course, in the kind of times in which you live, to "try the virtue of the word of God" even more than you now do; and if you, brothers and sisters, become even more familiar than you now are with what might be called the grammar of the gospel--that is, its basic elements, its doctrines, and its structural as well as conceptual relationships between all that makes up the gospel of Jesus Christ--by heightening your literacy in spiritual things, you will become increasingly able to withstand the heat of the day. This literacy in spiritual things will enable you to give principle pre-eminence over procedure--but without being ignorant of procedure in the Kingdom. You will be able to balance the needs for both substance and structure in your lives. This spiritual literacy will likewise permit you to blend the comprehension of the gospel doctrines with the doing of its duties; and thus balanced, you will be able to stand.

As you come to understand even better God's straightforward plan of salvation, the time will come, if you are not already there, when you will actually exclaim with Nephi, "Oh, how great the plan of our God." (2 Ne. 9:13.) Once this is achieved, you will also understand better than you now do what the scriptures call the adversary's plan which is "a very subtle plan." (Alma 12:4-5,

28:13, Hel. 6:30.) When the adversary wants to harvest people, in words found in Ether, he simply decides to "adopt the old plans" which have served him so well for so long. (Ether 10:33.)

As your grasp of the gospel is strengthened, you will be able to avoid "looking beyond the mark." (Jacob 4:14.) So many in our society engage in one form or another in "looking beyond the mark." They are like a person in a speeding car who focuses on a traffic light two intersections away while running a red light at the immediate intersection. Such people lack the precious perspective of the gospel. Though refusing to be overwhelmed by the simplicity of the obvious, they are taken in by the complexity of trivia--all because they lack a true sense of proportion.

With gospel perspective, you will be concerned not only with socio-political and economic inequality, but you will become anxious more and more about another form of inequality. It is the most profound form of inequality. It is that inequality which is, the scriptures tell us, brought about by sin and transgression. It is the most lasting form of inequality! (See Alma 28:13.) Clearly, the Lord loves us all perfectly, individually; but the righteous are favored of God because they receive blessings according to obedience to His laws. These blessings, therefore, come to mankind unequally and differentially because of our differential desires--desires which inevitably we carry out one way or another. (See 1 Nephi 17:35.)

What I have said up to now is a rather long introduction to my text for tonight, which I have entitled, "The Education of Our Desires." It is an intriguing quotation from President Joseph F. Smith which says much about the importance of continuing education in that you and I have a continuing challenge to educate our desires. For tonight's purposes, I shall define "desire" as characterizing our very inmost feelings, as representing the distillation of our strongest motivations, and as that which truly calls the cadence for our thoughts and deeds. Indeed, brothers and sisters, our desires clearly control the tilt of our souls. We one day find that our desires are truly our own and cannot be wholly implanted from outside by anybody, even God, without dishonoring our individual moral agency by means of which we are free to choose good or evil.

Especially in our time, the buffet which is spread before believers permits you to choose, even more than your parents and grandparents, from a myriad of opportunities to do good. It is probably the most elaborate buffet ever for believers. Your opportunities for service are greater than any of those who have preceded you. Also, however, the smorgasbord of sin is placed before us in astounding array; and accessibility to it is, alas, less restrained by peer, by family, by political,

and by social pressures than ever before in the past.

Your generation, perhaps more than any other, is free to choose; and this at a time when the contrast between that which is good and evil, that which is right and wrong, is sharpened and profound. Therefore, your deepest desires will control your choices, and your choices will then control the consequences to be felt both in this life and in the life to come.

Alma, as he did so often, put the case succinctly:

"I ought not to harrow up in my desires, the firm decree of a just God, for I know that he granteth unto men according to their desire, whether it be unto death or unto life; yea, I know that he allotteth unto men according to their wills, whether they be unto salvation or unto destruction." (Alma 29:4, underlinings added.)

Let me cite some examples of the role of desire as we see it operating in scriptural history. Abraham, for instance, desired greater knowledge, righteousness, and happiness in his life--much more than he found in his father's household; and he records:

"And, finding there was greater happiness and peace and rest for me, I sought for the blessings of the fathers, and the right whereunto I should be ordained to administer the same; having been myself a follower of righteousness, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess a greater knowledge, and to be a father of many nations, a prince of peace, and desiring to receive instructions, and to keep the commandments of God, I became a righteous heir, a High Priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers." (Abr. 1:2, underlinings added.)

Abraham really wanted to be righteous. He had a lapsing father, but his desires overcame the poor example he had before him. Some of you may have that challenge, too; that is, a lapsing parent. Nephi's situation was different. He was impressed both by what his father knew and was, thus Nephi desired to know more about the Lord's overarching plan of life:

"For it came to pass after I had desired to know the things that my father had seen, and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceeding high mountain, which I never had before seen, and upon which I never had before set my foot." (1 Ne. 11:1.)

Two young men desiring something better than that which they then had, one with a righteous father and one with a lapsing father. What they desired then controlled what happened subsequently. No wonder, as President Joseph F. Smith says, you and I must take great care concerning the education of our desires!

I do not know at what precise point the prodigal son came to his senses--or precisely what the preceding emotions and experiences were, but he did come to his senses and acted upon his desire for a better life. The scriptures say "when he came to himself" he arose and went home to his father. (Luke 15:11-32.)

I don't know either what preceded Enos' stirrings of desire for righteous service to his fellowmen, but he acted upon them. (See Enos 12,13.)

Just how these stirrings of desire begin within us we know not. Enos records how it was that he "began to feel a desire for the welfare of his fellowmen." (See Enos 1:9.) Enos prayed mightily and was given according to the desires of his heart. (See Enos 1:12.)

The Lord can work with us. He tells us in the scriptures, "even if we can do no more than desire to believe;" (See Alma 32:27) but presumably we must initiate and develop the desire. It is my personal opinion that desire is not something, given our free agency, which can be developed within us against our will.

Perhaps you will permit a parenthetical example. Much celebrated in our time is the so-called Roots phenomenon, the desire of people to know about their ancestors. It is not a new phenomenon. We read in the Book of Mormon about how Mosiah expended much effort to have certain Jaredite records translated. Why? "And this he did because of the great anxiety of his people, for they were desirous beyond measure to know concerning those people who had been destroyed." (Mosiah 28:12, underlinings added.)

Thus, our desires stir us deeply, whether as a prodigal, a young prophet like Enos, or people who wish to know about their ancestors. These desires are a profound part of our personality; and they lie at the very root of our being; and therefore, our deeds and our actions really become an extension of those desires.

One prophet wrote:

"And it is requisite with the justice of God that men should be judged according to their works; and if their works were good in this life, and the desires of their hearts were good, that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good.

The one is raised to happiness according to his desires of happiness, or good according to his desires of good; and the other to evil according to his desires of evil; for as he desired to do evil all the day long even so shall he have his reward of evil when the night cometh.

And so it is on the other hand. If he hath repented of his sins, and desired righteousness until the end of his days, even so he shall be rewarded unto righteousness." (Alma 41:3,5,6, underlinings added.)

Indeed, our desires even control the degree of divine disclosure that can be given to us as was true with this group about whom we read in the scriptures:

"Yea, after having been such a highly favored people of the Lord; yea, after having been favored above every other nation, kindred, tongue or people; after having had all things made known unto them, according to their desires...of that which has been, and which is, and which is to come." (Alma 9:20 underlinings added.)

These people really wanted to know, brothers and sisters. They really wanted to know about the history of man before their time, during their time, and that which

was to come. They really desired to know, and it was granted to them. Indeed, part of our problem at times is that we sometimes desire to know truth, but not all of it. In one revelation we read of a certain people, "Behold, I say unto you, that they desire to know the truth in part, but not all, for they are not right with me." (D&C 49:2.) Thus there are people who want the truth, but not all of it; and they, too, get their desires.

Once there were those who believed on Jesus--these men were placed in the power structure of ancient Jerusalem. They believed on Him, but desired their seat in the synagogue more than to become His followers. (Read John 12:42-43.) Nevertheless, among the chief rulers, also, many believed on Him; but because of the Pharisees, they did not confess Him lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. I wonder where those seats in the synagogue are today? The individuals got their desires. They kept their place in the synagogue but missed the great adventure of discipleship for Jesus, yet it was according to their desire. At judgment time, they cannot have it any other way. They received that which they desired. Again, no wonder it is so vital that we educate our desires.

We become the composite of our desires; and the relentless justice of God, as well as His ceaseless mercy, operate perfectly bringing about a situation of which Jeremiah said: "I the Lord search the heart; I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways and according to the fruit of his doing." (Jer. 17:10.)

We live, as I have indicated to you, in a carnal and secular society. It is becoming more so, except for people like you. These words might describe our society:

"Having gone according to their own carnal wills and desires; having never called upon the Lord while the arms of mercy were extended towards them; for the arms of mercy were extended towards them, and they would not; they being warned of their iniquities and yet they would not depart from them... (Mosiah 16:12, underlinings added.)

King Noah, for instance, represented, as you know, gross personal immorality. He also was a political leader who believed in a gross taxation of his people--almost as if the two things went together. (See Mosiah 11:2-3.) King Noah received the desires of his heart for which he alone was responsible.

Now, because you are advancing disciples, I share with you this sober warning about the continuing need for us to educate our desires:

"For although a man may have many revelations, and have power to do many mighty works, yet if he boasts in his own strength, and sets at naught the counsels of God, and follows after the dictates of his own will and carnal desires, he must fall and incur the vengeance of a just God upon him." (D&C 3:4, underlinings added.)

It is the continuing education of our desires and the alignment of those desires with the desires of our Heavenly Father that become the great challenge of education for us.

Now, may I presume to give you some counsel out of the love and respect I have for you as the generations who will govern the Church and who have such a rendezvous with destiny. My counsel is rooted in respect for the free agency God has given to you, for if ever there were a generation that could do nearly as it pleased, behaviorally, yours is probably it. Unless you align your desires with those of the Lord, you will have neither happiness here nor everlasting joy in the world to come.

The education of your desires includes developing a sense of history so that you will see nonsense for what it is, however resplendently arrayed in the fashions of the day. Wickedness never was happiness. Therefore, I plead with you--do not mistake the laughter of the world for genuine happiness; it is merely garrulous guilt trying to reassure itself; it is the sound of selfishness emanating from the cul-de-sac of terrible loneliness. Don't mistake it for something else.

If, like Abraham of old, you desire greater happiness, then you, too, must also be desirous of being further instructed in the ways of the Lord and in the grammar of the gospel. You must seek to comprehend not only the structure of the plan of salvation, but also its substance, including the schooling that must come to each of us concerning the wintry doctrines of the gospel such as those about the role of adversity.

"My people must be tried in all things, (That isn't somebody down the block; that's you.) that they may be prepared to receive the glory that I have for them, even the glory of Zion; and he that will not bear chastisement is not worthy of my kingdom. (D&C 136:31)

Nevertheless the Lord seeth fit to chasten His people; yea, He trieth their patience and their faith." (Mosiah 23:21)

Those scriptures refer to us, brothers and sisters, about our need to develop the capacity to be patient in the midst of life's ordinariness or its tribulations and to develop the capacity to accept chastening circumstances that are required for the shaping of our souls. We can better do that if we understand the grammar of the gospel and the structure as well as the substance of the plan of salvation.

The tutorial implications of the scriptures I have just read to you are enormous. The implications of those scriptures can only be managed by our desiring and then developing a deep trust in our Heavenly Father, in His purposes and in His love of each of us. When we have a genuine desire for Him to instruct us, as did Abraham, and to tutor us, then either the onrushing and sometimes crushing events of life or its deceptive ordinariness will be seen realistically and developmentally by us. Either way, one will then allow for the divine design and the pattern



which is present even when we cannot see it.

A perplexed Nephi, on one occasion, said of his Father in Heaven, "I know that He loveth His children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things." (1 Ne. 11:17.) He knew what mattered most. He didn't know all the other answers, but he knew that God loved him. That same knowledge must be yours; and that same realization of His love must sink into the very marrow of your soul, so that you can trust Him even when He is stretching your soul. You will know that He loves you even when you cannot explain the meaning of all the other things that are going on around you. The clinical experiences of life are built into even the seeming ordinariness of life and into the routine and repetition of life itself. Sometimes, as the Prophet Joseph says, we have crushing experiences that break off a whole piece of us painfully. My experience is that while that sometimes happens, most of the time our souls get polished by the sandpaper of circumstances relentlessly, carefully; and yet it is under way.

If we have that kind of deepened trust and a desire to be instructed, we will have the patience to outlast life's seeming imponderables and contradictions. In, perhaps, the most significant dimension of desire, we must be willing to submit to our Father in Heaven, even in those moments when He desires us to be righteously independent in making some of life's most difficult decisions in order that we will develop our capacity to act for ourselves under the influence of His spirit and to be His friend in all circumstances, even in the midst of gloom. It is that circumstance about which President Brigham Young spoke when he said that you and I must learn to be "righteous in the dark," (Secretary's Journal, 28 Jan. 1857) and that requires us to be tutored and to desire to be tutored...even in those circumstances that cause such wrenching of the soul. Abraham could not have done what he did on Mount Moriah if he had not early had a deep desire to be instructed in the ways of the Lord. The one followed the other.

When we have this kind of precious perspective, we have another great advantage. We will not mistake the imperfections in each other or institutional imperfections for imperfections in God or His plan, and that requires some sophistication; but if we desire to develop that kind of trust, we will come to understand that we are in a congregation of imperfect but striving people, saints in the very slow process of becoming. That means that many things in the Church are done imperfectly. It must be so in this laboratory of life; and as we pass through these necessary clinical experiences, it should not surprise us. We end up practicing upon each other, sometimes cruelly, sometimes indifferently, and sometimes we practice on each other with a zeal that doesn't have much wisdom to accompany it. Either way, once we have the

precious perspective of the plan of salvation, we can surmount those disappointments; and that's why I focus tonight on our strengthening our gospel grasp upon the iron rod!

Frankly, I see no way for us to educate our desires except for us first to understand God's desires for us and then proceed--in that lifelong educational process--to align our desires with His. It can never be the other way around! God's plan of salvation is plain and straightforward; there can be no mistaking its purposes. We are to become like Jesus, virtue by virtue and experience by experience. There is neither another objective nor any other way, and once we desire to be instructed by Him, we will see that it is so.

We do other chores while we are here in mortality, for some of which your education at the University of Utah is fitting you and fitting you well; but those chores that we do here in mortality are part of a process not the point of the process. These individualized experiences and opportunities for service that we will have, each of us, carry within each experience an opportunity to become more like Jesus, if we will but use that opportunity; but we won't unless we have a desire to be like Him. That means once we have made His purposes for us paramount in our lives, our souls will be wrenched again and again. There is no pain-free way that the natural man can be realigned, and that's why we must deeply desire to be like Him so that those desires can then be carried out in our lives. Without those desires, the relentless reminders of His unfolding purposes will become irritations instead of confirmations of His love for us.

There is so much mis-perception about life that is rooted in the mis-perceptions of the character and purposes of God--not only who He is but what His desires for mankind are. I give to you this interesting example of the mis-perception about Jesus concerning His birth. The Jewish authorities who awaited the Messiah were "looking beyond the mark." They dismissed Jesus of Nazareth because they failed to ascertain that He'd been born at Bethlehem. They assumed He was a Galilean because He came from Nazareth; so surely He had been born there. Yet, He and His parents went to Bethlehem to be taxed. How could they miss that clue? They were looking beyond the mark, and this ancient example of missing the obvious could be multiplied indefinitely by citing mis-perceptions of God that abound in the world today. God gets blamed all the time for mankind's misuse of free agency. He gave us agency so that we could grow, and then many of mankind blame Him for misuse of that agency. God gets blamed for the tutoring and testing dimensions of life because He knows our possibilities better than we know ourselves.

Thus it is, if people do not desire to believe in the Lord, give up their seats

in the synagogue, if necessary, they will not desire to behave! We ought not to be so surprised once people's theology comes tumbling down, that so does their behavior.

The rationalizations people produce when they are about to sin would be amusing if these were not so tragic. Every time I hear someone say, "I have a right to be happy," it makes me nervous because I think they are about to do something wrong. After all, do not the scriptures inform us that men and women are that they "might have joy"--not will have joy? (2 Ne. 2:25.) We have an opportunity for happiness but not a right!

As I prepare to conclude and thank you for the patience of putting up with this voice, (it's harder for you than it is for me), may I suggest to you that the spiritual person is one who is especially literate in the things of the intellect because such a man or woman is aware and respectful of the lessons that come to us of scriptural history. The sensualist is inevitably provincial. He lets the carnal desires of the moment control. David of old was provincial! Uriah was the universalist. He understood about loyalty. David forgot. The fleeting things of the moment are allowed to predominate over the things of eternity. I speak not only of sexual lust but also of inordinate desires for status, praise, wealth or recognition. Or, even more simply, the desire for careless ease--that casual, slackened, and selfish form of life which robs life of its meaning and of its tutoring possibilities--by insulating oneself from the very experiences of life which, after all, are why we have come here!

We cannot, of course, you and I, frustrate the overall purposes of God, but we can surely fail to rise to our personal possibilities because we fail to desire, as did Abraham, that which is possible within us. Around us all the time, there are people settling for less than they are, for less than they have the possibility to become. So much of that pattern stems from an intrinsic failure to educate their desires. One of the great virtues of the simplicity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that as we ponder even though vexed by the circumstances of life--we see tribulation, not as God's indifference to us, but as an expression of His caring and, even more than that, as a vote of confidence in us, in that which we have the power to become by surmounting. Without that precious perspective, then life is seen differently. Without the precious perspective of the gospel, Jean Paul Sartre said, "Hell is other people." In contrast we have the second great commandment which says to us, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. So I plead with you, as one who has confidence in you, collectively, to educate your desires, as President Smith said. Don't be distracted by the disturbances around you for you live in a time, as indicated earlier, when the old sins have become the new rights.

Don't let the smorgasbord of sin be camouflaged by appearing to be anything but what it always has been--misery for which there is no relief except repentance.

Now, I bear my testimony to you, my brothers and sisters. This Church is led by Jesus Christ in a marvelous blend of letting us work things out and directive revelation. He has so structured this life's experiences so that a bishop learns to get revelations, but he does not have everything done for him. He must struggle; he must strive, because that's the way we grow. The same might be said for any of us whatever our calling.

The Lord will not make it too easy because He loves us too much. And if we desire to be like His son, Jesus Christ, we must then submit to those experiences which will help us move in that direction. There is no easy escalator that will take us there. There are no shortcuts! In an hundred ways that could be mentioned if there were time and voice, He has beckoned us to become like Him because He loves, and that love is too pure for Him to let us cut corners.

One of the things I notice about the straight and narrow path is that there are no corners to be cut. It must be so.

In addition to certifying to you that this is His Church, I certify to you of the existence of His Lordship, Jesus Christ--that He is a reality and that so is His personality a reality whether it is His mercy, His patience, His love, His compassion, His truthfulness. And we are to become like Him. He uses the Church as a great shaping instrumentality to move us along that path, but it is filled with imperfect people and that was foreseen by Him. In the midst of that imperfection, we are to struggle to become more like Him.

Lastly, I certify to you that He loves us with a perfect love which brings Him to that rendezvous, yet future for you, because you are young--that moment when He shall stand alone to greet at the entry to His Kingdom, "for he employeth no servant there." He is there not only to certify our worthiness to enter, but because He loves us. He waits for you, brothers and sisters, in that marvelous rendezvous which is so movingly portrayed in the scriptures... He waits for you with open arms. That is why He's there!

Do nothing to mar that moment. Do not allow yourselves to be deflected from that straight and narrow path, but seek to arrive at that rendezvous in such a circumstance, spiritually, that you can be drenched with joy and know the touch of those arms, for His arms of mercy and love are extended for you. I certify to you that that rendezvous is a reality. For some of you, it will come soon and some later, but it will come, if you are faithful. Of that, I testify!

I close by giving you an apostolic blessing. Inasmuch as He who knows you

best and loves you best, even perfectly, has placed you here now in the midst of all of these things--some so trying and so distressing--I ask His blessings to be upon you. But I so bless you that you can be sufficiently stirred by the righteous desires you now have so that those desires can begin to work in you to give an increased place for a portion of His words. Thus there can be a deepening appreciation of the gospel in your lives and the motivation to become more and more like Him. And, in those moments when you will wonder if your courage will fail, to be brave enough to be who you are! I assure you He has not placed you here to fail, but to succeed.

I thank Him for that testimony which I leave with you and for such utterance as this feeble voice has provided tonight. My words are intended to be strong in affection, in adoration of Him, in confidence for you, and of assurance that He lives and that He loves you. He does indeed wait for you with open arms, of which I testify as one of His special witnesses in the Holy name of Jesus Christ! Amen.