Decisions for Which I've Been Grateful

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Brothers and sisters, it’s wonderful to be with you. I love my students at Harvard, but they don’t bring the Spirit with them into the classroom as you have done today. I wish there were a way for them to do it because we would learn so much more together if they had the wisdom to have the Spirit with them. I had prepared a talk, which I thought was going to be a good talk for you. Then yesterday, as I flew out and tried to prayerfully think through how to deliver that talk, it became apparent that I had prepared the wrong talk. So I have put something together, and I hope that whoever you are, for whom this talk was intended, that I can do a good job for you.

I decided that I wanted to just recount for you five decisions that I made when I was a young adult that in retrospect have had a profound influence on my life, because these are decisions that I think many of you will find yourself needing to make, and maybe, if I can talk through with you how I wrestled with and made those decisions, it might help you think through a similar problem if it arises in your life.

The first decision for which I am very grateful is the decision I made when I was very young that I was going to get the best education possible. Where this excitement came from was my wonderful mother. I remember her teaching me when I was 16 years old the image that we as members of the church were like clay in the hands of the potter. And I remember her teaching me that “the more you learn, Clayton, the more talents that you develop, the more ways God can shape you to be useful in building his kingdom.” That really stuck with me. I remember going as a freshman to BYU and just like being a kid in a candy store, looking at that course catalog and reading about all these interesting courses, and I wanted to take every one. I enrolled my first year in Oriental Mythology, Economic Geography, Black History, and a number of more main-stream topics and loved every one of them. I think I loved them because a primary motivation for my learning was that there was a cause in which I was enrolled as a BYU student that was far greater than my personal cause, and I can testify that every calling I have had in the church, in every one of those callings, the things that I’ve learned about arts and history and literature and science and management have helped me to magnify that calling, and I am very grateful that I made a decision to pursue education as deeply as I possibly could.

The second decision for which I am grateful is the decision I made to learn if the Book of Mormon is true. President Bednar mentioned that when I finished at BYU I received a scholarship to go to Oxford University in England. When I arrived at Oxford it was very clear that it was going to be inconvenient to be a Mormon in Oxford. The Rhodes Scholarship Trust that had given me my scholarship had a lot of activities for the recipients of the scholarship, and if I was going to be active in the church it would be difficult for me to participate in those activities. I realized, as I thought through the extent to which I wanted to be involved in the church, that, you know, I didn’t even know that the Book of Mormon was true. I had read the Book of Mormon, until that point, seven times in my life, and in each of the seven times I had gotten to the end of the book and had knelt in prayer and had asked God to tell me if it was true, and I had gotten no answer. And I realized, as I thought through why I hadn’t gotten an answer, that each of the previous seven times, I had read it on an assignment, either from my parents or a BYU instructor or my mission president or a seminary teacher, and my objective was to finish the book. But this time I just desperately needed to know for myself if the Book of Mormon was true. To that point in my life I had sustained myself on a belief in many of the doctrines of the church and in the trust of my
parents because I knew they knew it was true, and I trusted my parents. But finally when I arrived at
Oxford, for the first time in my life I just desperately needed to know if it was true.

Some of you who have seen pictures of Oxford may know that it’s the world’s oldest university. The
building that I lived in was built in 1410-beautiful to look at, horrible to live in. It just had a little heater
that they had dug out of the stone wall and had inserted there. I decided that I would commit every
evening from 11 to 12 o’clock to reading the Book of Mormon to find out if it was true. I wondered if I
dared spend that much time, because I was in a very demanding academic program, studying applied
econometrics, and I was going to try to finish the program in two years, whereas most of the people in
the program finished it in three, and I just didn’t know if I could afford allocating an hour a day to this
effort. But nonetheless I did, and I began at 11:00 by kneeling in prayer by the chair by that heater, and I
prayed out loud. I told God how desperate I was to find out if this was a true book, and I told Him that if
He would reveal to me that it was true, that I then intended to dedicate my life to building this kingdom.
And I told Him if it wasn’t true that I needed to know that for certain, too, because then I would dedicate
my life to finding out what was true. Then I would sit in the chair, and I read the first page of the Book
of Mormon, and when I got down to the bottom of the page, I stopped, and I thought about what I had
read on that page, and I asked myself, “Could this have been written by a Charlatan who was trying to
deceive people, or was this really written by a prophet of God? And what did it mean for me in my life?”
And then I put the book down and knelt in prayer and verbally asked God again, “Please tell me if this is
a true book.” Then I would sit in the chair and pick up the book and turn the page and read another page,
pause at the bottom, and do the same thing. I did this for an hour every night, night after night in that
cold, damp room, at the Queen’s College Oxford.

By the time I got to the chapters at the end of 2nd Nephi, one evening when I said my prayer and sat in
my chair and opened the book, all of a sudden there came into that room a beautiful, warm, loving spirit
that just surrounded me and permeated my soul, and enveloped me in a feeling of love that I just had not
imagined I could feel. And I began to cry, and I didn’t want to stop crying because as I looked through
my tears at the words in the Book of Mormon, I could see truth in those words that I never imagined I
could comprehend before. And I could see the glories of eternity and I could see what God had in store
for me as one of His sons. And I didn’t want to stop crying. That spirit stayed with me the whole hour,
and then every evening as I prayed and sat with the Book of Mormon by the fireplace in my room, that
same spirit returned and it changed my heart and my life forever.

I look back in the conflict that I experienced, wondering whether I could afford to spend an hour
everyday apart from the study of applied econometrics to find if the Book of Mormon was true, and you
know, I use applied econometrics maybe once a year, but I use my knowledge that the Book of Mormon
is the word of God many times every day of my life. In all of the education that I have pursued, that is
the single most useful piece of knowledge that I ever gained.

I love to return to Oxford. Most of the people there are either students or they’re tourists who have come
to look at a beautiful university. But I love to return there because it’s a sacred place, and I can look at
the windows of that room where I lived, and I think that that’s the place that I learned that Jesus is the
Christ, that he is my living Redeemer, and that Joseph Smith was the prophet of the restoration for the
true church. I just wanted to tell you this because some of you probably came here to Rexburg already
having learned for yourself that this is God’s church. But for those of you that may still be living on the
testimony of others, I invite you to set aside an hour everyday and find out for yourself if this is true,
because it will change your heart as it has changed mine. And someday you’ll be able to come back here
to Rexburg, and whereas other people are here for many different reasons, you’ll be able to go to the place where you lived at the time that God revealed this to you, and point at it to your children and your spouse, and say “That’s a sacred place because that’s where I learned that Jesus is the Christ.”

The third decision that I made for which I am very grateful was a decision that also happened to me at that time. The bishop of the Oxford ward then called me to be the young men’s president. We had 48 young men in the Oxford ward, only one of whom was active. I had no idea how I was going to carry on my course of study and do anything near a capable job as a young men’s president. But what I decided to do is that I would get up every morning at 7:00 a.m. and focus on applied econometrics until 6:00 p.m., and then thereafter I would focus on being a Young Men’s President. In the midst of this, I learned that my father was dying of cancer, and I dropped out of school for a time to come back home and take care of him until he passed away. When I got back, that meant that I even had less time to try to finish a very ambitious degree, and I thought to myself, ‘Maybe I’d better ask the bishop to release me because it would just take too much time away from my study.’ But then I thought, ‘No, if I know the Book of Mormon is true, then I better do what it says,’ and it had told me in 3 Nephi 13:33 that I should seek first the kingdom of God in His righteousness and all these things would be added unto me. And so that’s what I did. I bought a bicycle, and every night from six to nine, I rode around the streets of Oxford looking up these 47 inactive young men, inviting them to join us at church, and ultimately six of them did.

We met (the Oxford ward did) in a meeting room in the top of a pub. If Lucifer had picked our meeting spot, he couldn’t have done better. The only place for the Aaronic priesthood to meet was at the top landing of the back staircase where they stored the kegs of Guinness ale. And so we arranged the kegs in a semi-circle every Sunday and sat on the kegs. I fasted every Sunday that somehow the Lord would bring into that awful environment a wonderful spirit that would touch these young men’s hearts, and it did. All six of those young men served missions. But it was a big bite out of my studies, and as the time for my final exams arrived, I was really worried that I might not be able to pass, because in the Oxford system there aren’t any courses that you take. You just continuously study your subject and at the very end of the course you have to take a big, long, four day, 32 hour examination where you have to put it out all on paper. My tutor told me that I wasn’t prepared, that I better wait and graduate the next year, but I knew that if I had gone and done the things that the Lord commanded that he would open a way for me to pass the test. So I fasted and prayed and told the Lord I had two months left. I needed to know what questions the examiners were going to ask so that I could study the questions and pass the exam. I then prayerfully went to the library and put myself in the examiners shoes, and thought about, ‘If I wanted to really skewer Clayton Christensen, what questions and curve balls would I throw at him on this exam?’ Then for two months I studied to know the answers to those questions.

The night before the exam, I went off to one of the meadows at Oxford and knelt in prayer, and I poured my heart out to the Lord, and I recounted how hard I had worked to study economics, and how hard I had worked to magnify my calling as the Young Men’s President. And I plead with Him that He would bless me. And the next day, as I opened the exams, every one of the questions that the examiners threw at me was a question that I had come to know that they would ask. And the lesson that I learned from this is that when Heavenly Father invited us to seek first the kingdom of God, and promises us that all these other things will be added to us that He was dead serious. That is a promise that we can bank on. And I incite you, my brothers and sisters, that when you find yourself confronted with a conflict between the pursuit of a career and the pursuit of magnifying your calling in the kingdom of God, that if you will believe God, and trust in Him, He will bless you in ways that are beyond your comprehension.
The fourth decision I made for which I am very grateful was also one that I made when I was at Oxford. You may have noticed how high they had to raise this podium - I am 6’8”, and when you are tall you don’t have to be very good to play basketball. So I tried out for and made the Oxford Varsity basketball team. We had a great team. Those guys were the best friends that I’ve ever known in my life, and we went through the regular season and were undefeated. Then we went into the British equivalent of what we would call here the NCAA basketball tournament. We marched through each of those games in a fairly easy fashion until we came to the final four, and then kind of cluelessly I looked at the schedule to find out when the games were scheduled, and to my horror saw that the final basketball game was scheduled to be played on Sunday in Bristol. And I was devastated because I had made a commitment to myself when I was 16 that I would never play basketball on Sunday. I went to the coach truly conflicted because these guys, we had worked our guts out all season long and I was the starting center, and the guys on the team were the best friends that I’ve ever had in my whole life and I needed to help them win this goal that we had all practiced for. And yet I’d made this commitment to Heavenly Father. So I told my coach about this conflict and asked him what I should do. And he was just incredulous. He said, “We have worked so hard for this. I can’t believe you’re even asking.” He said, “I don’t know who your god is, but mine, let me tell you what he’s like. He lets us by on things like this. And Clay, just this once, just this once, play this game and then go off and do whatever you have to do with your god and make peace with him and never do it again.”

Well, then we played in the semi-final game, and my friend who was the back-up center got up-ended on a rebound and fell down on his shoulder and dislocated his shoulder, which then increased the pressure for me to play that game. So I went back into my hotel room after that game and knelt down and asked Heavenly Father if it would be all right, just this once, if I played that game on Sunday. As I started my prayer, really before I could even utter a word, Heavenly Father put a full-sentence answer in my mind, and it was “Clayton, what are you even asking me for? You know the answer.” I sat up on the bed and looked at the door and I said, “You’re right, I know the answer.” So I went to my coach and I told him how sorry I was, but I just couldn’t play on Sunday. Then I went to the Bristol ward meetings that day, and prayed that God would bless my teammates that they would win, and they did, which means, I guess, I wasn’t that important to the team. But you know, as time has passed, and that was a decision I made now almost 30 years ago, it looms as one of the most important decisions I have ever made because it would have been very easy to say, in general, keeping the Sabbath day holy is the right commandment, but in my particular extenuating circumstances, it’s okay, just this once, if I don’t do it. And the reason that decision has proven so important to me is that my whole life has turned out to be an un-ending stream of extenuating circumstances, and had I crossed that line just that once, then the next time something came up that was so demanding and critical, it would have been so much easier to cross the line again. And when I have been subsequently confronted with opportunities to look at pornography or not pay my tithing, or compromise on others of God’s commandments, this lesson that I learned has been very important. The lesson is it really is easier to keep the commandments 100 percent of the time than it is 98 percent of the time. If I could paraphrase Alma 34:34, that same spirit that possesses our souls before something “just this once,” possesses our souls after we do it as well, and if we do it just this once, doing it again becomes so much easier. And that’s why that decision has loomed to be so important in my life, and I am grateful that I drew the line in a safe place, and never crossed it.

The fifth decision that I wanted to recount for you, was the decision I made to call myself on a mission again. I served a wonderful mission in Korea. As I mentioned I did most of it only being able to say that I believed the Book of Mormon was true, and I testified of those things that I knew to be true, and I felt the Spirit with me almost everyday when I was a missionary. But when I returned I began to feel the Spirit less and less as my life progressed. We moved to Boston and I enrolled in the MBA program at Harvard, and I was called at the time to serve as a counselor to our bishop, and I was a busy guy. I just
did everything I could to magnify my calling. I was studying the scriptures everyday, I was praying, and yet on a day to day basis it just seemed like I was feeling the Spirit less and less as time wore on. And I yearned to have the same spirit return to me that I had felt when I was a missionary, and yet it didn’t seem like any of the usual levers of magnifying my calling or study or prayer brought the same spirit back into my heart.

Then we moved to Washington and I had the chance to take a job in the Reagan Administration. All of a sudden we were living with new people and I was working with new people and I was riding in on the bus with new people, and it gave me many more opportunities than I had had living in a stable situation in Boston to begin talking with people about my church. Some of those opportunities then resulted in deeper opportunities to discuss the gospel, and I then invited one of my co-workers to come to our home with her boyfriend to hear the missionary discussions. I remember it was a Sunday afternoon, and my wife and I were scrambling around trying to clean up the living room before they and the missionaries arrived and I put on a cassette tape of the Mormon Youth Symphony and Chorus in our stereo, and they were singing “The Spirit of God,” like a fire is burning. They came to the third verse where they sang “We’ll call in our solemn assemblies in spirit/ To spread forth the kingdom of heaven abroad/ That we by our faith may begin to inherit/ The visions and blessings and glories of God” (Hymns, 2). As they sang those words, I felt a beautiful spirit again come into the room and into my heart, and I realized that as I had begun working again to spread for the Kingdom of Heaven abroad as a member missionary, that the visions and blessings and glories of God had returned to my life. I was dreaming spiritual dreams and thinking happy, spiritual thoughts as I walked to the bus in the morning, and joy had come back into my heart, just as it had been there when I was a missionary.

This is what I realized: Just imagine that you’re the general of an army, and you’ve got some state-of-the-art-weapons, and you’ve got to decide which of your soldiers you’re going to give these state-of-the-art weapons to. You’ll give your best weapons to those soldiers who are right in the front line, engaged in direct combat with the enemy. Those soldiers who are operating behind the front lines, who are driving the supply trucks and cooking the soup and keeping the records, they won’t need the state-of-the-art weapons because they never really confront the enemy, per say. I realized what had happened to me is I had been released from my mission and had begun engaging in service in the church as a member that most of my assignments were in fact administrative in character, and as they were administrative in character, plain old Clay Christensen, with his plain old talents, was perfectly capable of doing most of the assignments that I was given as an administrator in the Church. But when I made that decision to become again a missionary for the Lord Jesus Christ, it was as if geographically I repositioned myself right on the front line, engaged in direct combat with Satan in this vicious war that he is waging over the souls of the children of men.

It turns out that missionary work is an assignment in the church at which we cannot succeed if we don’t have the Spirit with us at all times. And I am so grateful that I came to make that decision to be a missionary again because it has blessed our family in profound ways. The next year, 1984, I was listening to General Conference, and Elder M. Russell Ballard gave a talk at that time where he invited us as members of the church to set a date, a point in the future, as a commitment to our Heavenly Father. He invited us-don’t pick a person that we were going to share the gospel with but to set a date. He promised us that if we would do all that we could to engage in conversations about the gospel, with as many people as we could, that God would bless us by that date, that we would intersect with somebody who would accept our invitation to meet with the missionaries. His talk just sunk into my heart. That night I went home and knelt by my bed and committed to my Heavenly Father that by a date I would find somebody for the missionaries to teach. That was in 1984. That year, by the date, Heavenly Father
blessed me to find a man who we could bring into our home to teach with the missionaries. I have set a date once, twice and now three times every year as a commitment to my Heavenly Father that I’m going to be a missionary, and every Sunday I fast that God will help me to intersect with somebody who I can invite to learn of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Every time I pray, I pray that God will put somebody in my path, and I’m grateful to be able to say that God has answered my prayer every time. It’s been 20 years.

This last Sunday, we had probably the best first discussion that I’ve ever participated in, taught to one of my wonderful students, a young man from France named Guillaume. On the last day of my class, which is taught to the second year students in our MBA program, I describe for the students how all semester long we’ve been studying about these companies and goals and strategies for achieving these goals, and yet in the way that they invest their money on a day to day and a year to year basis, they tend to invest in things that offer the shortest term payback. That pattern of directing their investment decisions often causes companies that could be very successful in the pursuit of a lofty strategy actually to lead themselves toward failure. And I told my students, “You know, now you are graduating from the Harvard Business School. And a lot of you in your personal lives are going to do the same thing.” I told them that “none of you have a strategy to leave here and go get divorced, and raise children who are alienated from you and become unhappy people, but that is actually the strategy that many of you are going to implement, because as you have opportunities to spend your time and energy, your very likely to spend them in pursuit of career success because it offers them most immediate and tangible evidence of achievement.” And I invite them not to do that, but I tell them, “but in order for you to figure out how you’ve got to spend your time and your energy, you need to figure out what the purpose of your life is.” Then this year I told them about the experience that I had had dedicating an hour everyday when I was a student at Oxford to figuring out what the purpose of my life was. And I invited them to do the same thing.

A couple of days later I got an email from Guillaume, and he said, “Professor Christensen, I’ve been thinking about it and I don’t know what the purpose of my life is. Will you help me? He came in and as we talked he said, “I’m going to spend an hour a day; I just don’t know what to read.” I was able to give him my copy of the Book of Mormon, and invite him to take the missionary discussions. And I was so grateful this Sunday to be able to testify to him that of all the things that I taught him in our class, the things we were teaching him that day were the most important. I was so grateful to be able to tell him that he is a son of God, and that there really is a purpose for him coming here.

Sharing the gospel has allowed me to feel the Spirit in my life more profoundly and more consistently than anything else that I’ve done. And I invite you. Some of you have served missions, some of you are anticipating a call, some of you may not go on missions because of other callings that you have, but I invite all of you to be member missionaries. If you can live your life positioned squarely on the front line engaged in hand to hand combat with Satan over the souls of the children of men, there is no way you can succeed in that calling if you don’t have the Spirit of God with you every day. It will be a great blessing to you. Don’t let yourself only engage in administrative work in this church. It’ll have a profound influence on your family.

Several years ago another one of my students accepted my invitation to come and meet with the missionaries. The missionaries, during the second discussion, just did a marvelous job. And at the end of the discussion they bore their testimonies to Sunil, and then I bore mine and my wife Christine bore her testimony, and then I called on one of the missionaries to give the closing prayer, and our 11 year old son Spencer had been sitting over on the piano bench listening to the discussion. He raised his hand and stood up and he said, Dad, could you wait a minute? I have something to say. And I still remember that beautiful clear look in Spencer’s eyes as he looked at Sunil and he said, Sunil, “I am only an 11-year-old
boy, but I want you to know that I know that the things that the missionaries taught you today are true. I know that God lives and that you are His son.” And he closed his testimony in the name of Jesus Christ. As Spence bore that testimony, that beautiful spirit came into the room again, and I started to cry, right there in front of my student. The next day Sunil sent me an email and he thanked me for arranging the missionaries to teach and he complimented them on how clear the lessons were, and he said, “But you know, when your son Spencer stood up and said those things, I felt something come into the room. Is that what you mean when you say the Spirit of God?” I thought to myself, ‘I’d pay a million dollars to give my son an experience half that good.’ It really has been a wonderful decision we made to be missionaries.

So these are the decisions that I hope you will make correctly too. Make a decision to get the best possible education that you can because it will give you so many more opportunities to be shaped by the hand of God, to serve competently in many different ways in building His kingdom.

Second, the most valuable thing you can learn as you pursue your education is to find out for yourself that the Book of Mormon is the word of God.

Third, when you have opportunities to serve in the Kingdom of God, “seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (3 Nephi 13:33) with confidence that other things will be added to you as they are necessary.

Fourth, whenever you are tempted, “just this once,” to cross a line on something God asked you to do, please remember, brothers and sisters, it is much easier to keep the commandments 100 percent of the time than it is 98 percent of the time.

Then finally, call yourself on a mission, because it will bring the Spirit into your home in a way that almost nothing else can.

A couple of years ago I got assigned to serve for five years as an area authority seventy and it really is an assignment to travel around the northeastern part of North America and at every opportunity bear my testimony that Jesus is the Christ. I would like to close my remarks to you today by bearing that testimony to you. When I received the assignment and was told that I needed to be able to bear a sure testimony that Christ lives, I’m not sure I knew that I knew what sure was. But as I have sought to be able to magnify my calling and have sought to know Jesus Christ, I can stand before you today and testify that I know with assuredly that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that he lives. I know of assuredly that he knows every one of you. He has already suffered for all of the sins of everyone you meet and he is so desperate, because he loves them so much, to be able to forgive them of their sins. And yet he can’t do it unless we as servants of his give people the opportunity to accept him. I know that he is so grateful for everything you do that gives people the opportunity to accept his love and his sacrifice and his atonement which he has given in their behalf. I testify that He lives, and I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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