

The Tree of Everlasting Life

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I am grateful to be with you today on another great day at BYU-Idaho. In 1888 Jacob Spori, the first principal of the Bannock Stake Academy, stood not far from where we are today and spoke these prophetic words:

The seeds we are planting today will grow and become mighty oaks, and their branches will run all over the earth.¹

The Bannock Stake Academy eventually became Ricks College, and Ricks College became BYU-Idaho. Jacob Spori was a man of faith and vision, and his words about seeds and trees and the influence of this school are in fulfillment before our very eyes. You and this sacred and set apart place are the fulfillment of that great prophecy.

Today—some 120 years later—I, too, want to speak about seeds and trees. I pray that the Holy Ghost will be with us today so that I may speak directly and personally to each one of you.

Becoming a Disciple

The mission of BYU-Idaho is to assist you in becoming a disciple of the Savior and a leader in your families, the Church, and the world around you. At the heart of that preparatory process is Student Honor. Listen to the words that we use to describe what we mean by Student Honor.

Student Honor is following the path of discipleship and learning to be more like Christ—learning to think, to feel, and to act more as He does.

Brothers and sisters, I hope you will live lives of honor. With all my heart,

I want you to live the baseline standards and then build on that baseline to become more like the Savior. This is the pattern we have established in Student Honor—live the baseline standards as your foundation and then build on that foundation to become more like Christ. It is a scriptural pattern. The great Book of Mormon prophet Alma taught this pattern to the people of Gideon in these words:

For I perceive that ye are in the paths of righteousness; . . . I perceive that ye are making his paths straight. **[Live the baseline standards.]**

And now I would that ye should be humble, and be submissive and gentle; easy to be entreated; full of patience and long-suffering; . . . being diligent in keeping the commandments of God at all times. . . .² **[Become more like Christ.]**

In our discussions with you, Sister Clark and I have learned how you apply this pattern in your lives. There are two ways you become more like Christ:

1. You serve: You follow the impressions of the Spirit to magnify your callings and serve those in need. As you serve the Lord, you become more like Him. In the words of President Benson, you "day by day . . . move closer to the Lord, . . . [living] quiet lives of goodness, service, and commitment."³

2. You seek: Because you face challenges, the Holy Ghost guides you to humbly ask the Lord to bless you with more courage, or kindness, or patience, or love. You seek these gifts through the mercy and grace of the Savior.

The Lord has invited us to pursue both of these avenues. His invitations to

"feed my sheep"⁴ and to "take my yoke upon you"⁵ are examples of His call to us to **serve** in His kingdom. His invitations to "come unto Christ, and lay hold upon every good gift"⁶ and to "seek me diligently and ye shall find me"⁷ are examples of His call to us to **seek** the blessings of Christlike virtues.

These two avenues are closely and intimately connected; one leads to the other and back and forth all through our lives.

I believe the avenues of serving and seeking are what Peter had in mind when he wrote these marvelous words in 2 Peter, chapter 1, verse 1 and verses 3-7:

Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ:

According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue:

Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature

And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge;

And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness;

And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.⁸

As you act in faith with "all diligence" to serve and seek the Lord, you will realize "exceeding great and precious promises." Through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and in His divine power, you can partake of the divine nature and become more and more like Him.

Peter's words are inspiring, full of hope and promise. But they also raise a very important question: What should you actually do to give "all diligence" as you serve and seek?

Mark's Story

Let me tell you a story about a young man who faced just this question. Mark is not a real person, but his story is based on real experiences. After his first year at BYU-Idaho, Mark served a mission in Brazil. When he returned, his high school sweetheart Carol convinced him to move to Cedar City, Utah, where she was attending SUU on an athletic scholarship. Mark transferred to SUU, but things did not work out like he had hoped. After dating for three months, Carol told Mark she was not happy with their relationship and thought they ought to date other people.

Mark was hurt and confused, but he did not give up. Since he really loved Carol, he continued to talk with her and finally convinced her to see him again. Their relationship picked up and over the next few months went really well. At least that is what Mark believed. In fact, Mark thought things were going so well he bought a ring and proposed to Carol.

On the night Mark proposed, Carol was surprised and upset. She turned Mark down and said things that really hurt Mark. Carol told him that she could see she would not be happy with him, that there were other guys she had met she wanted to date, and that it was time to move on. Mark was humiliated, frustrated, and angry; and he said some things in anger to Carol he should not have said.

Mark finished out the year at SUU, but he was unhappy and uncomfortable. It seemed to him that everything about SUU reminded him that Carol was the only reason he moved to Cedar City. He decided to return to BYU-Idaho.

In the first year Mark returned to BYU-Idaho, he moved in with some old friends from his old ward; but he did not date anyone. He was still angry and hurt. He doubted himself and was deeply afraid of rejection. Instead of fading with time, the anger he felt toward Carol festered. The pain and self-doubt and fear were like a dull ache in his heart. He was moody and cynical (especially about girls). He let his calling in the ward and his home teaching slide, and his roommates grew worried about him. His roommates finally convinced Mark to go see the bishop. As he sat in the bishop's office that day, he knew that he should forgive Carol for the pain she had caused him, put his life in order, and get on with finding an eternal companion. But all of that seemed way too hard. It was as if he stood on one side of a great canyon needing to get to the other side, with no way across.

But there was a way. There is a way-for all of us. Despite challenges that seem daunting, we can act in faith in "all

diligence."⁹ We have received "great and precious promises."¹⁰ It does not matter if we need the gift of more patience, or diligence, or courage, or charity. We can serve, and we can seek. We can become more like Christ.

The Lord's Framework

The Lord has given us a framework to help us understand how we may partake of the divine nature and receive the supernal blessings of Christlike virtues. At the heart of the framework is a beautiful metaphor of the tree of everlasting life "which is precious above all,"¹¹ "the most desirable above all things,"¹² "and the most joyous to the soul."¹³ At the Last Supper Jesus taught His disciples about the tree, its branches, and its fruit:



I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.

I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.¹⁴

The tree (the "true vine") represents the Savior, and the fruit represents the gifts of His Atonement, including Christlike virtues. If we abide in Christ and He in us, we can receive these marvelous gifts ("bear much fruit") through His power and His grace ("for without me ye can do nothing"). We partake of the divine nature because the tree of everlasting life is in us. Alma taught this same principle. Speaking of the good news of Christ's atoning sacrifice, he said:

"... I desire that ye shall plant this word in your hearts, and ... nourish it by your faith. And behold, it will become a tree, springing up **in you** unto everlasting life."¹⁵

This was precisely what Mark needed. He had already planted the seed. He had served a mission and felt his testimony of the Savior grow. In his service to the Lord, the seed had sprouted and begun to grow; but it was not yet the magnificent tree of which Alma speaks. In fact, since the problems with Carol had festered, the young tree in Mark had stopped growing. Mark needed the tree to grow again and bear fruit. He needed to partake of the divine nature. He needed the gift of a merciful and forgiving heart, which he did not have.



In the Lord's framework, the first step in the growth of the tree is desire. Please turn with me to Alma, chapter 32, verse 27:

But behold, if ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe **[forgive]**, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words.¹⁶

Whether you are planting the seed for the first time or trying to rekindle growth in the tree, *desire is the beginning*. For Mark the critical question was: Do you want to forgive Carol? Do you want to be rid of the anger and the pain and everything that you are feeling? As Mark focused his mind and heart on what he really wanted, he realized he was sitting in the bishop's office because he wanted the anger and the pain to go away. It was the beginning of a desire to forgive.

With that beginning, Mark needed to take the second step and "*give place*" in his heart to the word of the Lord about forgiveness and the Atonement. The Lord said, "Of you it is required to forgive all men."¹⁷ He also said, "I am Jesus Christ the Son of God ... for behold, by me redemption cometh."¹⁸

To "give place" in his heart for these words, Mark needed to see himself with the eye of faith as a new person—forgiving Carol—rid of the anger and the pain through the power and mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ. For Mark to see himself with the eye of faith, he not only needed to imagine the tree growing and bearing fruit, but he needed to acknowledge in his

mind and feel in his heart that it could happen. This is the beginning of hope.

This process did not happen all at once for Mark. There were more visits with the bishop, much prayer, and much searching of the scriptures. But there came a point where he really did see himself with the eye of faith. He began to see that the gift of forgiveness was possible. At that point, Mark took the third step: *he kept his heart open to the Spirit*. Alma's powerful promise in verse 28 became a reality. If you, too, will keep your heart open to the possibility of new growth, the Holy Ghost will cause the word of God to "enlarge [your] soul; . . . enlighten [your] understanding, . . . [and it will begin] to be delicious to [you]."¹⁹

Just as life-giving moisture in fertile soil makes the young tree put out new roots and branches, the Holy Ghost makes the word of God come alive in the prepared heart. Let me give you an example of the word of God about the power of the Atonement and forgiveness.

Jesus suffered for our sins. But He also suffered our infirmities, our weaknesses, our pain, our humiliation, our self-doubt, our fear, and the effects of our anger. And He overcame them all. Everything we have suffered and are suffering, He suffered and overcame. This means that Mark did not need to carry the burden of fear, pain, and anger anymore. Jesus Christ, who has all power in heaven and in earth, who heals all wounds, would take the burden. Mark could give it to Lord; in fact, the Lord already had it.

When this thought took hold in Mark's heart, it was truly delicious to him. His understanding increased, and he

began to see and feel light coming into his life. There was greater hope than before, because the Word is true.

Mark had come a long way; but there was much, much more to do. The young tree had begun to grow, but it needed much more care. This was the fourth step: *nourishing the tree with great care*. Here is Alma again (verse 37):

And behold, as the tree beginneth to grow, ye will say: Let us nourish it with great care, that it may get root, that it may grow up, and bring forth fruit unto us . . .²⁰

But if ye neglect the tree, and take no thought for its nourishment, behold it will not get any root. . . .

Now, this is not because the seed was not good, neither is it because the fruit thereof would not be desirable; but it is because your ground is barren, and ye will not nourish the tree, therefore ye cannot have the fruit thereof.²¹

Since we are growing a tree, it means there must be a sustained period of nourishing and cultivating before there will be fruit. And it means also that the nourishing must be done with "great care." It is not easy to grow a fruit tree. But if it gets root and grows strong, the tree will bear fruit for a long, long time.

"Nourishing with great care" involved three things Mark's young tree needed to continue to grow and bear fruit.

First: A Fertile Heart

A fertile heart is a heart that is open to the Savior, ready to make new commitments of faith and righteousness.

It is a heart where deep desires to be good and to do good combine with an attitude of willing obedience. It is a heart prepared to change.



A barren heart is full of the rocks and dense clay of pride, selfishness, lust, and greed. It is a heart committed to anger and sin and disobedience.



Mark's heart was open to the word of the Lord, but there were pockets of rocks and clay beneath the surface of his heart. His pride and the anger he had harbored toward Carol had hardened his heart. He had stopped being of service to others, and he had stopped feeling close to the Lord. The only way for the young tree to grow was for Mark to break up the rocks and the clay. Mark needed a broken heart. He had to change. Mark had to exercise his faith in Christ and repent of

his lack of service and the pride, anger, and cynicism in his heart.

Mark learned something we all must learn: repentance is essential to the growth of the tree and its gifts of Christlike virtue. We all have in our hearts rocks and clay we need to break up. As we seek to become more like Christ, we all need to change. We all need hearts that are broken and spirits that are contrite. We all need to repent.

Second: Nourishment of the Spirit

The young tree began to grow in Mark's heart because the Holy Ghost made the word of God come alive in him. Growth will continue only with the continued nourishment of the Spirit. The Holy Ghost knows exactly what Mark needs to receive the gift of forgiveness and mercy. Through the "unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost,"²² Mark can receive increased faith and trust in God; deeper knowledge and understanding of the Atonement; feelings of love, peace, comfort and reassurance; increased empathy for others; and an increased testimony of the Savior. These are the nutrients Mark's young tree needs to grow and bear its precious fruit.

Mark knew from his mission and other experiences that to have the Spirit with him he needed to pray always with real intent, to feast on the words of Christ, to keep the commandments, and to do nothing that would drive the Spirit away. Mark's bishop reminded him of these things and also taught him that service to others would bring the Spirit into his life. The bishop promised that the Lord would bless Mark with a forgiving heart if Mark would act on the promptings of the Spirit to serve others.

Third: Deep and Extensive Roots

Mark's young tree needed to sink many roots down deep in his heart. Deep and extensive roots anchor the tree, protecting it against the winds and storms of life. Deep roots secure the nourishment an abundance of fruit will require. But deep and extensive roots also protect the soil of the heart, keeping us safe from floods of anger or despair or temptation and binding our commitments and desires to the Lord.



With a fertile heart and nourishment of the Spirit, the young tree can begin to take root. But Mark can act in faith to strengthen and deepen those roots. He can begin with his roommates, making sure the old cynical, angry, moody Mark does not reappear, watching carefully to be kind to them, to serve them, and to forgive them. He can love and serve others he knows. Here is an example:

Acting on a prompting, Mark decided to go see Bill, one of the students Mark home taught. Bill had never gotten along very well with Mark, but Mark made the visit. Mark arrived just in time to help Bill clean up a big mess caused by a flooding dishwasher. (Bill had put liquid dish soap in the machine.) That

experience was an important lesson in forgiveness and the beginning of a great friendship.

It took time and "all diligence"²³; but with much prayer, repentance, and service, Mark's heart began to change. The old cynicism and anger began to disappear. In its place came light and joy and confidence in the Lord. It was not easy. It did not happen quickly, but the "great and precious promises"²⁴ came true. Through the ministry of the Holy Ghost, the power of the Atonement worked in Mark according to his faithfulness. He received the gift of a merciful and forgiving heart. Mark nourished the tree, and he tasted its fruit.

The day came when Mark called Carol and apologized to her for his angry words those many months ago and sought her forgiveness. Carol told Mark she was sorry for the pain she had caused him, and Mark was so happy that he could say to her in all sincerity of heart that he had forgiven her and wished for her nothing but the best.

The Tree of Everlasting Life

Brothers and sisters, Mark's story can be your story. If you are at the beginning of testimony and faith in Christ, you can plant the seed of the word of God and with "all diligence"²⁵ nurture the tree so that it gets root and bears fruit. If you, like Mark, have planted the seed but need to renew growth in the tree, you, too, can repent, serve the Lord, and seek the nourishment of the Spirit. If you have already planted and nourished the tree and tasted of its fruit, more growth and more blessings lie ahead for you too.



The Lord's invitation to you is to serve Him and seek Him all of your lives. He wants you to have the tree of everlasting life in you—a tree with deep, extensive roots; a tree with many strong branches; a tree with an abundance of fruit. This is your destiny.

Brothers and sisters, I stand before you today as a witness of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior and Redeemer of all mankind. He lives! This is His Church and kingdom, restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith. The Savior leads His Church today through His living prophet, Thomas S. Monson.

Jesus Christ is the great miracle of the tree of everlasting life. I know from my own experience that the "exceeding great and precious promises"²⁶ are true. With all the energy of my soul, I pray that you will serve the Lord and seek Him with all your hearts, living lives of Honor and becoming more and more like Him.

I leave you with my love, my witness, and this blessing. If you will plant the word of God and nurture it with diligence and faith, the gospel of Jesus Christ will sink down deep in your heart and the tree that is Christ will spring up in you unto everlasting life. You will partake

of the divine nature and know and feel the glorious blessings of the Atonement of Christ. Through your faithfulness, the gifts of His virtues and His redeeming love will be in and abide in you forever. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

1 Crowder, D.L. (1997), *The Spirit of Ricks*, Rexburg ID: Ricks College, 3-4

2 Alma 7:19, 23

3 Ezra Taft Benson, "A Mighty Change of Heart," *Ensign*, Oct. 1989, 2

4 John 21:16

5 Matthew 11:29

6 Moroni 10:30

7 D&C 88:63

8 2 Peter 1:1, 3-7

9 2 Peter 1:5

10 2 Peter 1:4

11 1 Nephi 11:9

12 1 Nephi 11:22

13 1 Nephi 11:23

14 John 15:1, 5, 8

15 Alma 33:23 (emphasis added)

16 Alma 32:27

17 D&C 64:10

18 3 Nephi 9:15, 17

19 Alma 32:28

20 Alma 32:37

21 Alma 32:38-39

22 D&C 121:26

23 2 Peter 1:5

24 2 Peter 1:4

25 2 Peter 1:5

26 2 Peter 1:4