
Speaking Today

Do Things That Make a Difference

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From a talk given to the Salt Lake Area Young Adults, 18 October 1981

M. Russell Ballard, “Do Things That Make a Difference,” *Ensign*, June 1983, 68

I asked several young adults, some who work at the Church offices, some who live right in my own home, and others who are my friends, two questions: What are your major concerns? What would you like me to say? The response was interesting. Several said, “Speak to us about our needs and how we can cope with the world we are living in.” Hopefully I will be able to say some things that will zero in on some of the needs that you might feel you have.

I pray that I might be able to communicate better than is illustrated in this story recently told by Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone. A judge was interviewing a woman regarding her pending divorce and asked:

“What are the grounds for your divorce?”

“About four acres with a nice little home in the middle of the property with a little stream running by.”

“No,” he said, “I mean what is the foundation of this case?”

“It is made of concrete, brick, and mortar,” she responded.

“I mean,” he continued, “what are your relations like?”

She answered that they were fine. “I have an aunt and uncle living here in town as do my husband’s parents.”

He said, “No, do you have a real grudge?”

“No,” she replied, “we have a two-car carport and have never really needed a garage.”

“Please,” he tried again, “is there any infidelity in your marriage?”

“Yes, both my son and daughter have hi-fi sets. We don’t necessarily like the music, but the answer to your question is yes.”

“No. Does your husband ever beat you up?”

“Yes,” she responded, “about twice a week he gets up earlier than I do.”

Finally the judge asked, “Why do you want a divorce?”

“Oh, I don’t want a divorce. I’ve never wanted a divorce. My husband does. He says that he can’t seem to communicate with me.”

I hope I do better than this woman did before the judge.

Keep Trying to Do What Is Right

What are your concerns in life at your age? One of the questions that might be asked is: How do you cope with living in today’s world? I have been privy to some discussions of the youth of the Church during which they have questioned the advisability of marriage and of bringing children into a world that seems to be as topsy-turvy as our world is today. Like them, some of you have had questions on your minds about schooling, employment, marriage, and other general directions in life—about how to best fulfill the expectations of yourself as well as the expectations the Lord has for you.

As I listen to all of the doom and gloom that is being broadcast in the newspapers and on television, the thought runs through my mind: How grateful I am that I didn’t stop trying to do what was right in my life when I heard on Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, that America had been attacked and war was imminent. I was a little younger than you are, when on that fateful day I came home from priesthood meeting and walked into my home to learn from my father that Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor. I thought: What is the future, what are the possibilities, what is going to be left for me? All of these kinds of thoughts rolled through my mind as the United States of America rolled up its sleeves to move full scale into World War II.

That was a terrible war! There were terrible things that happened, and for a long time everything seemed to be negative. It was discouraging to many, I suppose. But the world did not come to an end—it went on. And I would like to suggest to you tonight that you do not hold back from living a full life, and from working hard to accomplish your goals in life because some people think that great calamities will soon come upon the earth. There have been some who have predicted earthquakes and destruction of all kinds to be upon us momentarily. The Savior himself tells us about many devastating times that lie ahead. (See **Matt. 24.**) But none of us

knows exactly when those times are going to occur. So I would suggest that you follow the advice that I once heard Elder Boyd K. Packer give. He said something like this: “Plant your fruit trees. Cultivate them, fertilize them, watch them grow, and enjoy the fruit thereof. If the end comes during the process, so what? Do not deprive yourself of enjoying the fruits of your labors by living in fear of the world’s problems that lie ahead.”

Develop a Positive Attitude

If I were your age and thinking about life and its meaning, there is one characteristic that I would strive to develop. That characteristic is to have a *positive attitude*. I am a great believer that what you and I think about will ultimately come to pass. I believe if we think about committing a sin long enough, we will find ourselves entangled in that sin. I believe if we think about what it takes to be successful long enough and if we are willing to discipline ourselves to the principle of success, we will experience success. Yes, I am a great believer that “as [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he.” (**Prov. 23:7.**)

I believe in the principle that you ought to act “as if” you were the person you would like to become. As you do that, you will grow into that kind of person. Ultimately your very actions, your attitude, will lead you into being the kind of person that you want to be. George Bernard Shaw said: “People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don’t believe in circumstances. People who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can’t find them, make them.” (Quoted in John Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations*, 15th edition, ed. Emily Morison Beck, Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1980 p. 680.) We must learn to become creators of circumstances and not creatures of them. Oh, how important that is at your stage in life.

Often I have been asked the question “Would you like to go back and be twenty years of age again?” My answer is a careful one. The answer is yes, providing I could know then what I know now. I am not sure I would like to be twenty starting with what I knew when I was twenty, which wasn’t very much. In the process of living this past thirty-three years, I have learned that I really do have control to a great degree over my circumstances. If I don’t like them, I’ve found there are certain things I can do to change them. If I want to move to higher ground, if I want to have more positive experiences, I must think about life in positive terms, not dwell on the negative.

Develop the Skill of Setting Worthy Goals

I believe you can train yourself to become a positive thinker, but you must cultivate a desire to develop the skill of setting personal worthy and realistic goals. I suppose that at about every seminar or fireside you go to at your age someone talks to you about goal setting. Maybe some of you get weary of listening to the principle of setting goals. But let me tell you something about goal setting. I am so thoroughly convinced that if we don’t set goals in our life and learn how to master the technique of living to reach our goals, we can reach a ripe old age and look back on our life only to see that we reached but a small part of our full potential. When one learns to master the principle of setting a goal, he will then be able to make a great difference in the results he attains in this life.

I would suggest to you that setting goals is a simple process, but there are two or three things about it you have to learn. I learned in my business career that I could get all excited about a principle, or that I could get all excited about trying to do something, but if I did not write it down and if I did not place it in front of me where I looked at it over and over and over again until it really became part of me, I did not accomplish that goal. I would suggest that if you want to have success in the goal setting process, you learn to write your goals down. I would even put them in a very prominent place—on your mirror or on the refrigerator door. Keep your goals in front of you, in writing. Then, with the desire to reach your written goals, you will be more willing to pay the price that successful goal-oriented people must pay.

I believe if each of you would commit yourself to this one principle tonight, then one of my goals that I set for you at the beginning of my talk would be reached—that goal being that you would be better young men and young women as you leave the Tabernacle tonight than you were before you came in.

Develop Self-discipline

Let me share another important principle with you. This is the principle of self-discipline. You see, you control to a large degree your own destiny. You control your own life. Some of you might cop out by saying, “Well, Brother Ballard, you just don’t understand my environment. You just don’t understand my circumstances. You just don’t understand what kind of a father I have, or what kind of a mother I have, or what kind of a this or that.” “No,” I would say to you, “put all of that in the back of your minds and bring forward to the front of your mind the worthy goals that you want to obtain. Then discipline yourself to the practice of personal self-discipline.”

Benjamin N. Woodson had some good things to say about self-discipline. Let me read to you a few statements from him:

“The longer I live, the more weight I attach to a man’s ability to manage and discipline himself. The longer I live, the more firmly convinced I become that the essential factor which lifts a man above his fellows in terms of achievement and success is his superior capacity for self-discipline.

“Education is a priceless aid to success, of course, but education is not the difference. The educated derelict is a common sight, and so is the man who has achieved resounding success without the opportunity for, or the advantages of, a formal education. It seems a valid conclusion that while formal schooling is an important advantage, it is by no means a guarantor of success, nor is its absence a fatal handicap.”

I believe that when we have the proper attitude, when we learn to reach our goals, then when we apply the ingredient of self-discipline, there is not much that any one of us in this audience tonight could not accomplish, if we are willing to pay the price.

Mr. Woodson goes on:

“For my part, I have concluded that the quality which sets one man apart from another—the

factor which lifts one man to every achievement to which he reasonably aspires while the other is caught in the slough of mediocrity for all the years of his life—is not talent, nor formal education, nor luck, nor intellectual brilliance, but is rather the successful man’s greater capacity for self-discipline.”

Mr. Woodson offers a great suggestion, and I would recommend that you write it down. He says:

“All you need to do is this: Beginning this very day, stop doing some one thing you know you should not do.” After you have written this one thing down, stop doing it—tonight! Do you understand the assignment? You will write down one thing you will stop doing tonight that is holding you back.

Some of you will have the necessary self-discipline and courage to do this. Others of you will just sit here and say, “Oh boy.” You won’t pay any attention to it and so a month from now you will still be dragging behind you the same habit that is holding you back from being your best self.

A few of you will stop doing that one thing tonight. Why? Because you are going to write it down and then you are going to discipline yourself in such a way that you are going to take a problem out of your life.

Make Your Goals Happen

Now the second part of Mr. Woodson’s suggestion is this, “Start doing each day some one thing you know you should do!” Write down one thing that you are going to start doing that you have been meaning to do for a long time but that you just haven’t gotten around to. I don’t know what it might be, but place into your life, beginning tonight, one thing that you are going to do that is going to make you a better person. I believe if you make this a regular practice, you will start to fulfill the Savior’s teaching when he asked us, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” (**Matt. 5:48.**) Perfection is a process and not an event, and we will come to appreciate that perfection is an internal matter, not external. It is a process by which you and I learn to eliminate the things in life that are not good, replace them with the things in life that are eternal in nature, with the objective and thought that perfection is obtainable, but it must be earned. Do you understand that?

I love these recent words from Sister Camilla Kimball. She says, “Each of us has to deal with the conditions that life has given us. To one person the challenge is ill health, another may have a difficult marriage. A third may struggle for faith. Still another may have a hot temper to overcome. Perhaps to some the challenge is that life is just too easy. I believe that we will be judged by God according to his knowledge of our challenges and we may well be surprised, if we get to heaven, to see who else is there. My greatest challenge is to be a righteous follower of Jesus Christ. That takes a great deal of effort and sacrifice. In specific terms, I have covenanted to be a good wife and a mother. If I have not made a success of that, I have been a failure in life. All my other worldly activities, as satisfying as they are, are incidental to that one.”

That is Sister Kimball’s goal. You may have other goals in your life. If your other goals are

righteous, of God-given perspective, eternal in their nature, then go for them. Make them happen. You can be what you want to be. You must pray as a goal setter. You must pray for the inner strength to have the discipline necessary to do those things that will guarantee through your activity and your life that you will reach your goals. Then, I think, perhaps as important as anything, we have to have faith. We have to have faith in God. We have to have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And oh, how desperately we have to have faith in ourselves! I can't think of anything more difficult to work with as a General Authority than those young people who come to my office who have lost faith in themselves and have a low self-image.

Building a Good Self-image

May I talk to you about self-image for a moment? There should not be anyone here tonight who has a low self-image. How dare you or I to have a low self-image! We are the sons and daughters of God! We belong to Him. We are His children. He gave us birth. He gave us life. That knowledge alone causes every man and every woman, when they understand it, to rise and walk with their head held high. Yes, that is a great blessing.

Let me tell you a true story that happened to me this past August. In a very impressive way, it caused me to realize that I am a son of God. By assignment, Elder Derek A. Cuthbert and I went to Ghana and Nigeria. There we traveled for approximately ten days visiting the branches of the Church in these countries. We have a small number of members of the Church there. In the little community of Aboh, Nigeria, on an early morning, Elder Cuthbert and I joined about one hundred members to break ground for the first chapel to be built in Nigeria. We sang the only song most of the Saints knew, which was "I Am a Child of God." I fought away the tears as I heard one hundred recently baptized black members of the church, with their eyes glistening, their heads held high, singing from the bottom of their hearts, "I Am a Child of God." The thought surged through my mind: Oh, Heavenly Father, bless them to know that they really are.

We all are the sons and daughters of God. Therefore, none of us, no not one, should ever have a low self-image. We belong to him. We must struggle always to keep in our minds that our ultimate goal is to inherit eternal life. We work, we struggle, we set goals, we practice self-discipline. We do all of these things to become our very best selves. We exercise our faith in God, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, faith in his gospel which has been restored, and we build a strong faith in ourselves. If for any reason your faith in yourself is wavering tonight, gird up your loins and fresh courage take. Do what is necessary to kindle the bright, glowing blessings of faith in your life. Always remember, you are a child of God.

Spend Your Energy on Things That Make a Difference

A lot of people worry about things they shouldn't worry about. Our usual worries can be classified into these categories: (1) 40 percent never happen, (2) 30 percent are over and past and can't be changed, (3) 12 percent are needless health worries, (4) 10 percent are miscellaneous problems, (5) 8 percent are real problems, of which 95 percent can be solved. (*The Treasure Chest*, ed. Charles L. Wallis, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, p. 228.)

Sometimes young people will say to me, "Brother Ballard, I have had this problem in my life and

I haven't cleared it up." Depending upon the nature of the problem, I counsel with that young person and teach this principle: You must clear the problem up and then not spend one more second worrying about it. Past problems are like a stream when you are standing on a bridge—the stream is rolling underneath you and your problems have gone downstream. Regardless of how hard you try, you can't change the past. You cannot call it back. What I want you to learn to do is look upstream. Watch for the things that are coming down the river of life that you can change and control. Do not wear yourself out, young people, on those things that you cannot change. Now if there are those of you who have committed transgressions that are of the nature that require a visit with your bishop, please get to your bishop. When? Immediately! Get it cleared up! Get and keep your feet planted on the straight and narrow way. Don't wear yourself out over things that you can't change. I have watched the healing miracle when people learn to do the right things for the right reasons. So I urge you tonight, don't wear yourself out worrying about your past problems.

Set clear and specific goals. When you set a goal and when you commit yourself to the necessary self-discipline to reach that goal, you will eliminate most of the problems in your life. Spend your energies doing those things that will make a difference. Then you can become what you think about. If you think you have problems, if you think life is difficult, if you think the world is going to crack in half tomorrow, you work yourself up to be an ineffective you. But if you just have the simple faith that God is in his heaven and he is your Heavenly Father and he does know that you are here and he does love you—and that Jesus is the Christ, that he is your Savior, that he is your Redeemer, and that you love him with all your heart and are going to do all you can to keep his commandments—then peace comes. You are at peace and your life moves forward in a positive direction. It doesn't become like this story told by Elder Paul Dunn:

“The great Cunard shipping line of Great Britain has built some of the most magnificent ships in history, but one was extraordinary. Commissioned by the government to build a great military vessel, the shipbuilders constructed one that seemed to be engineered perfectly. Every detail was precise; every piece of equipment was the best available. But one little thing was wrong with the ship. Its great propeller was just slightly crooked—not really enough so anyone could notice, but just slightly askew. And when they took the great ship out for its maiden voyage, the builders discovered something terrible. The ship could not be steered in a straight line. It just went around in circles because of its slightly crooked propeller. Because this fine ship had no direction, it had to be scrapped and sold for razor blades.” (With Maurine Ward, *Dimensions of Life*, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979, p. 16.)

Now if your propeller is just slightly crooked, you could be going around in circles. That isn't where you want to go. Where do you want to get? You are trying to get to the celestial kingdom. We are struggling to become worthy to some day go into the presence of God and Jesus Christ and dwell with them.

I would like to read to you something about life and your position right now. Amulek taught it. Let me read his words to you.

“And now, my brethren, I would that, after ye have received so many witnesses, seeing that the

holy scriptures testify of these things, ye come forth and bring forth fruit unto repentance.

“Yea, I would that ye would come forth and harden not your hearts any longer; for behold, now is the time and the day of your salvation; and therefore, if ye will repent and harden not your hearts, immediately shall the great plan of redemption be brought about unto you.

“For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors.

“And now, as I said unto you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed.

“Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world.

“For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked.

“And this I know, because the Lord hath said he dwelleth not in unholy temples, but in the hearts of the righteous doth he dwell; yea and he has also said that the righteous shall sit down in his kingdom, to go no more out; but their garments should be made white through the blood of the Lamb.” ([Alma 34:30-36.](#))

And so, here we are tonight, a group of young adults. What a great time of life. What can we do with this beautiful life that is ours? Make the most of it! Take out of our lives those things that we need to repent of and put into our lives those things that will make the difference and make us better and stronger men and women. At the risk of perhaps offending some of you but hoping that it won't—if it does, let me apologize in advance, but I am going to say it anyway—I get concerned when I hear any group within the Church say, “What is the Church going to do for us?” or “What is the Church going to do for me?” Be very careful, my dear young brothers and sisters, that you don't fall into this trap. That is not the right question. The right question is: What can I do to build the kingdom of God? You ought to lose yourself in the service of others. You ought to be anxiously engaged in teaching within your own wards. You ought to be anxiously engaged in doing whatever the bishop asks you to do. You ought to have the calm, peaceful assurance in your own heart that your life is right and you are at peace with the Lord. You ought to be assured that all the blessings of eternity are going to be yours. There is only one way that you can forfeit the blessings of eternity. You can forfeit them by unrepented sins.

Do the Right Things for the Right Reasons

You live a righteous, pure life. You do the right things for the right reasons, and in God's due time, all of the blessings of eternity will be yours. You see, the key to this is personal self-discipline that leads to righteousness. The key is to do, and to learn to master living the gospel for the right reason, to build the inner self.

What makes President Kimball the great power that he is? Goodness knows, he has suffered more physically than perhaps any of us will ever comprehend. I stood in his presence one day when he was attempting to save a boy who had lost his direction. Yes, a young adult who had lost his direction. His propeller was so much out of kilter that he was not even going around in circles—he was going in the wrong direction toward the devil's kingdom.

I heard President Kimball say at a very key moment to that young man, "My boy, I have not enjoyed all of the physical sufferings that I have gone through. I would like to have been spared those." Then he riveted his eyes on this young man and said, "But in all my suffering I have come to know God." Chills went down my backbone and tears welled up in my eyes. Oh, brothers and sisters, the quest is to come to know God. President Kimball has learned—and you feel it when you walk into his presence—to control his body and physical appetites, by the power of his mighty eternal spirit.

You have a mighty spirit and so do I. The greatest education and the greatest thrust in our lives ought to be to build upon the things of the Spirit. You do that by practicing some of the principles we have been talking about.

I hope we have learned tonight that we cannot ignore keeping the commandments of God. We cannot excuse ourselves or rationalize or justify even the smallest things in our lives that we need to master. We must work to overcome them. We can become the masters of our own destinies by practicing self-discipline, by setting worthy goals that will lead to higher ground so that we can become what our Heavenly Father wants us to become.

I never dreamed that I would ever be called by the Lord to be a mission president. It seems impossible that now I have been called to spend the rest of my life as a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy. Oh, I wish I had thought about this as a remote possibility when I was twenty. You do not covet any position in the Church, but there are things in my life that I could have done better, more thoroughly, more committedly, to have better prepared me for today.

Now, listen; some of you, before you were ever born, were ordained to do great things. You were set apart to do some marvelous things in the kingdom of God. There is no question but that there are men here among you in this audience who have been ordained to be bishops, set apart to be high councilors, stake presidents, and that you women are to be leaders among the women and girls of the Church. I don't think I am taking any risk in suggesting that there are mission presidents among you tonight, if you live up to the commitment you made before you were born. That takes self-discipline, that takes mastering the ability to set goals, the ability to think straight, the ability to have faith in yourself, the ability to move in the right direction.

I would ask Heavenly Father, then, to bless each one of you that you might achieve complete peace within yourself so that you might bring peace to others. You can bring many unto Christ

on the conditions of repentance when you are at peace within yourself. God bless you and me to seek that peace. Be willing to live your lives in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ. Let us be willing to make what changes need to be made tonight, so that we can do a little better in the future than we have done in the past.

May we leave with that kind of a commitment. May we be better tomorrow than we have ever been before in all of our lives. President Kimball would have me leave his blessing with you, which I do. I leave my blessing, my witness, my testimony, that this is the church and kingdom of God. I know that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God. Some have said to me, “How do you know that, Brother Ballard?” I have answered that the Brethren have sent me on the Lord’s errands to far away places to administer the affairs of the Church, and that I could not have done so without the Lord’s blessing and the teachings from the Holy Ghost. As I have gone and returned on these errands, increasingly I have been able to testify that He lives. I know that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God. The Book of Mormon is the word of God. We have the truth. We have all the ingredients for a happy, full, and prosperous life. May God grant and bless us to be wise enough to strive with all our hearts for the future privilege of celestial living in the presence of the Lord, I humbly pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Let’s Talk about It

After reading “Do Things That Make a Difference,” individually or as a family, you might wish to discuss some of the following questions during a gospel study period:

1. The article lists several different things that we can do to improve our lives. Which of these suggestions can be especially helpful to you in your efforts to improve yourself in some particular way?
2. The author says that “we must learn to become creators of circumstances and not creatures of them.” In light of this, what can we do to cope wisely with the discouraging influences of today’s world?
3. What must we do in order to achieve worthwhile goals?
4. Although we should not worry about things we cannot change, repentance is necessary if we are to gain eternal life. How can we determine what we can change and what we cannot?
5. Why is it important that we learn to do the right things for the right reasons?

Gospel topics: agency, attitude, faith, goals, priorities, self-esteem
