

To the Mothers in Zion

President Ezra Taft Benson

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There is no theme I would rather speak to than home and family, for they are at the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church, in large part, exists for the salvation and exaltation of the family.

At a recent general priesthood meeting, I spoke directly to the young men of the Aaronic Priesthood regarding their duties and responsibilities. Shortly thereafter, at a general women's conference, I spoke to the young women of the Church, discussing their opportunities and their sacred callings.

Tonight, at this fireside for parents, seeking the sweet inspiration of heaven, I would like to speak directly to the mothers assembled here and throughout the Church, for you are, or should be, the very heart and soul of the family.

No More Noble Work

No more sacred word exists in secular or holy writ than mother. There is no more noble work than that of a good and God-fearing mother. This evening I pay tribute to the mothers in Zion and pray with all my heart that what I have to say to you will be understood by the Spirit and will lift and bless your lives in your sacred callings as mothers.

President David O. McKay declared: "Motherhood is the greatest potential influence either for good or ill in human life. The mother's image is the first that stamps itself on the unwritten page of the young child's mind. It is her caress that first awakens a sense of security; her kiss, the first realization of affection; her sympathy and tenderness, the first assurance that there is love in the world" (Gospel Ideals, p. 452).

President McKay continues: "Motherhood consists of three principal attributes or qualities: namely, (1) the power to bear, (2) the ability to rear, (3) the gift to love . . . This ability and willingness properly to rear children, the gift of love, and eagerness, yes, longing to express it in soul development, makes motherhood the noblest office or calling in the world. She who can paint a masterpiece or write a book that will influence millions deserves the admiration and the plaudits of mankind; but she who rears successfully a family of healthy, beautiful sons and daughters, whose influence will be felt through generations to come, . . . deserves the highest honor that man can give, and the choicest blessings of God" (Gospel Ideals, pp. 453-54). With all my heart I endorse the words of President McKay.

A Mother's Role is God-ordained

In the eternal family, God established that fathers are to preside in the home. Fathers are to provide, to love, to teach, and to direct. But a mother's role is also God-ordained. Mothers are to conceive, to bear to nourish, to love, and to train. So declare the revelations.

In section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord states that the opportunity and responsibility of wives is "to multiply and replenish the earth, according to my commandment, and to fulfil the promise which was given by my Father before the foundation of the world, and for their exaltation in the eternal worlds, that they may bear the souls of men; for herein is the work of my Father continued, that he may be

glorified" (D&C 132:63).

Husbands and Wives are Co-creators

With this divine injunction, husbands and wives, as co-creators, should eagerly and prayerfully invite children into their homes. Then, as each child joins their family circle, they can gratefully exclaim, as did Hannah, "For this child I prayed, and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him; therefore also I have lent him to the Lord: as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:27-28). Isn't that beautiful? A mother praying to bear a child and then giving him to the Lord.

I have always loved the words of Solomon: "Children are an heritage of the Lord: and. . . happy is the man [and woman] that hath [their] quiver full of them" (Psalm 127:3-5). I know the special blessings of a large and happy family, for my dear parents had a quiver full of children. Being the oldest of eleven children, I saw the principles of unselfishness, mutual consideration, loyalty to each other, and a host of other virtues developed in a large and wonderful family with my noble mother as the queen of that home.

Young mothers and fathers, with all my heart I counsel you not to postpone having your children, being co-creators with our Father in Heaven. Do not use the reasoning of the world, such as, "We will wait until we can better afford having children, until we are more secure, until John has completed his education, until he has a better paying job, until we have a larger home, until we have obtained a few of the material conveniences," and on and on. This is the reasoning of the world and is not pleasing in the sight of God. Mothers who enjoy good health, have your children and have them early. And, husbands, always be considerate of your wives in the bearing of children.

Do not curtail the number of children for personal or selfish reasons. Material possessions, social convenience, and so-called professional advantages are nothing compared to a righteous posterity. In the eternal perspective, children--not possessions, not position, not prestige--are our greatest jewels. Brigham Young emphasized: "There are multitudes of pure and holy spirits waiting to take tabernacles, now what is our duty?--To prepare tabernacles for them; to take a course that will not tend to drive those spirits into the families of the wicked, where they will be trained in wickedness debauchery, and every species of crime. It is the duty of every righteous man and woman to prepare tabernacles for all the spirits they can" (Discourses of Brigham Young, p. 197). Yes, blessed is the husband and wife who have a family of children. The deepest joys and blessings in life are associated with family, parenthood, and sacrifice. To have those sweet spirits come into the home is worth practically any sacrifice.

Special Promises of God

We realize that some women, through no fault of their own, are not able to bear children. To these lovely sisters, every prophet of God has promised that they will be blessed with children in the eternities and that posterity will not be denied them. Through pure faith, pleading prayers, fasting, and special priesthood blessings, many of these same lovely sisters, with their noble companions at their sides, have had miracles take place in their lives and have been blessed with children. Others have prayerfully chosen to adopt children, and to these wonderful couples we salute you for the sacrifices and love you have given to those children you have chose to be your own.

Rearing Children the Lord's Way

Now, my dear mothers, knowing of your divine role to bear and rear children and bring them back to Him, how will you accomplish this in the Lord's way? I say the "Lord's way," because it is different from the world's way.

The Lord clearly defined the roles of mothers and fathers in providing for and rearing a righteous posterity. In the beginning, Adam--not Eve--was instructed to earn the bread by the sweat of his brow. Contrary to conventional wisdom, a mother's calling is in the home, not in the marketplace.

Again in the Doctrine and Covenants, we read: "Women have claim on their husbands for their maintenance, until their husbands are taken" (D&C 83:2). This is the divine right of a wife and mother. She cares for and nourishes her children at home. Her husband earns the living for the family, which makes this nourishing possible. With that claim on their husbands for their financial support, the counsel of the Church has always been for mothers to spend their full time in the home in rearing and caring for their children.

We realize also that some of our choice sisters are widowed and divorced and that others find themselves in unusual circumstances where, out of necessity, they are required to work for a period of time. But these instances are the exception, not the rule. In a home where there is an able-bodied husband, he is expected to be the breadwinner. Sometimes we hear of husbands who, because of economic conditions, have lost their jobs and expect their wives to go out of the home and work even though the husband is still capable of providing for his family. In these cases, we urge the husband to do all in his power to allow his wife to remain in the home caring for the children while he continues to provide for his family the best he can, even though the job he is able to secure may not be ideal and family budgeting will have to be tighter.

Counsel of President Kimball

Our beloved prophet, Spencer W. Kimball, had much to say about the role of mothers in the home and their callings and responsibilities. I am impressed to share with you some of his inspired pronouncements. I fear that much of his counsel has gone unheeded, and families have suffered because of it. But I stand as a second witness to the truthfulness of what President Spencer W. Kimball said. He spoke as a true prophet of God.

President Kimball declared: "Women are to take care of the family--the Lord has so stated--to be an assistant to the husband, to work with him, but not to earn the living, except in unusual circumstances. Men ought to be men indeed and earn the living under normal circumstances" (Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, p. 318).

President Kimball continues: "Too many mothers work away from home to furnish sweaters and music lessons and trips and fun for their children. Too many women spend their time in socializing, in politicking, in public services when they should be home to teach and train and receive and love their children into security" (Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, p. 319).

Remember the counsel of President Kimball to John and Mary: "Mary, you are to become a career woman in the greatest career on earth--that of homemaker, wife, and mother. It was never intended by the Lord that married women should compete with men in employment. They have a far greater and more important service to render" (Faith Precedes the Miracle, p. 128).

Again President Kimball speaks: "The husband is expected to support his family and only in an emergency should a wife secure outside employment. Her place is in the home, to build the home into a haven of delight.

"Numerous divorces can be traced directly to the day when the wife left the home and went out into the world into employment. Two incomes raise the standard of living beyond its norm. Two spouses working prevents the complete and proper home life, breaks into the family prayers, creates an independence which is not cooperative, causes distortion, limits the family, and frustrates the children already born" (Spencer W. Kimball, San Antonio Fireside, 3 December 1977, pp. 9-10).

Finally, President Kimball counsels: "I beg of you, you who could and should be bearing and rearing a family: Wives, come home from the typewriter, the laundry, the nursing, come home from the factory, the

cafe. No career approaches in importance that of wife, homemaker, mother--cooking meals, washing dishes, making beds for one's precious husband and children. Come home, wives, to your husbands. Make home a heaven for them. Come home, wives, to your children, born and unborn. Wrap the motherly cloak about you and, unembarrassed, help in a major role to create the bodies for the immortal souls who anxiously await.

"When you have fully complemented your husband in home life and borne the children, growing up full of faith, integrity, responsibility, and goodness, then you have achieved your accomplishment supreme, without peer, and you will be the envy [of all] through time and eternity" (Spencer W. Kimball, San Antonio Fireside, 3 December 1977, pp. 11-12). President Kimball spoke the truth. His words are prophetic.

Ten Ways to Spend Time with Children

Mothers in Zion, your God-given roles are so vital to your own exaltation and to the salvation and exaltation of your family. A child needs a mother more than all the things money can buy. Spending time with your children is the greatest gift of all. With love in my heart for the mothers in Zion, I would like to suggest ten specific ways our mothers may spend effective time with their children.

Be at the Crossroads. First, take time to always be at the crossroads when your children are either coming or going--when they leave and return from dates--when they bring friends home. Be there at the crossroads whether your children are six or sixteen. In Proverbs we read: "A child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame" (Proverbs 29:15). Among the greatest concerns in our society are the millions of latchkey children who come home daily to empty houses unsupervised by working parents.

Be a Real Friend. Second, mothers, take time to be a real friend to your children. Listen to your children, really listen. Talk with them, laugh and joke with them, sing with them, play with them, cry with them, hug them, honestly praise them. Yes, regularly spend unrushed one-on-one time with each child. Be a real friend to your children.

Read to Your Children. Third, mothers, take time to read to your children. Starting from the cradle, read to your sons and daughters. Remember what the poet said:

You may have tangible wealth untold;
Caskets of jewels and coffers of gold.
Richer than I you can never be--
I had a mother who read to me.
(Strickland Gillilan, "The Reading Mother").

You will plant a love for good literature and a real love for the scriptures if you will read to your children regularly.

Pray with Your Children. Fourth, take time to pray with your children. Family prayers, under the direction of the father, should be held morning and night. Have your children feel of your faith as you call down the blessings of heaven upon them. Paraphrasing the word of James: "The . . . fervent prayer of a righteous [mother] availeth much" (James 5:16). Have your children participate in family and personal prayers and rejoice in their sweet utterances to their Father in Heaven.

Have Weekly Family Home Evenings. Fifth, take time to have a meaningful weekly home evening. With your husband presiding, participate in a spiritual and an uplifting home evening each week. Have your children actively involved. Teach them correct principles. Make this one of your great family traditions. Remember the marvelous promise made by President Joseph F. Smith when home evenings were first introduced to the Church: "If the Saints obey this counsel, we promise that great blessings will result. Love at home and obedience to parents will increase. Faith will be developed in the hearts of the youth of Israel,

and they will gain power to combat the evil influences and temptations which beset them" (James R. Clark, comp., Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 4:339). This wonderful promise is still in effect today.

Be Together at Mealtimes. Sixth, take time to be together at mealtimes as often as possible. This is a challenge as the children get older and lives get busier. But happy conversation, sharing of the day's plans and activities, and special teaching moments occur at mealtime because mothers and fathers and children work at it.

Read Scriptures Daily. Seventh, take time daily to read the scriptures together as a family. Individual scripture reading is important, but family scripture reading is vital. Reading the Book of Mormon together as a family will especially bring increased spirituality into your home and will give both parents and children the power to resist temptation and to have the Holy Ghost as their constant companion. I promise you that the Book of Mormon will change the lives of your family.

Do Things as a Family. Eighth, take time to do things as a family. Make family outings and picnics and birthday celebrations and trips special times and memory builders. Whenever possible attend as a family events where one of the family members is involved, such as a school play, a ball game, a talk, a recital. Attend Church meetings together and sit together as a family when you can. Mothers who help families pray and play together will stay together and will bless children's lives forever.

Teach Your Children. Ninth, mothers, take time to teach your children. Catch the teaching moments. This can be done anytime during the day--at mealtime, in casual settings or at special sit-down times together, at the foot of the bed at the end of the day, or during an early-morning walk together. Mothers, you are your children's best teacher. Don't shift this precious responsibility to day-care centers or baby-sitters. A mother's love and prayerful concern for her children are her most important ingredients in teaching her own.

Teach children gospel principles. Teach them it pays to be good. Teach them there is no safety in sin. Teach them a love for the gospel of Jesus Christ and a testimony of its divinity. Teach your sons and daughters modesty and teach them to respect manhood and womanhood. Teach your children sexual purity, proper dating standards, temple marriage, missionary service, and the importance of accepting and magnifying Church callings.

Teach them a love for work and the value of a good education.

Teach them the importance of the right kind of entertainment, including appropriate movies, videos, music, books, and magazines. Discuss the evils of pornography and drugs and teach them the value of living the clean life.

Yes, mothers, teach your children the gospel in your home, at your own fireside. This is the most effective teaching that your children will ever receive. This is the Lord's way of teaching. The Church cannot teach like you can. The school cannot. The day-care center cannot. But you can, and the Lord will sustain you. Your children will remember your teachings forever, and when they are old, they will not depart from them. They will call you blessed--their truly angel mother.

Mothers, this kind of heavenly, motherly teaching takes time--lots of time. It cannot be done effectively part-time. It must be done all the time in order to save and exalt your children. This is your divine calling.

Truly Love Your Children. Tenth, and finally, mothers, take the time to truly love your children. A mother's unqualified love approaches Christlike love.

Here is a beautiful tribute by a son to his mother: "I don't remember much about her views of voting nor her social prestige; and what her ideas of child training, diet, and eugenics were, I cannot recall. The main thing that sifts back to me now through the thick undergrowth of years is that she loved me. She liked to lie on the grass with me and tell stories, or to run and hide with us children. She was always hugging me. And I liked it. She had a sunny face. To me it was like God. Of all the sensations pleasurable to my life nothing can compare with the rapture of crawling up into her lap and going to sleep while she swung to and fro in her rocking chair and sang. Thinking of this, I wonder if the woman of today, with all her tremendous notions and plans, realizes what an almighty factor she is in shaping her children. I wonder if she realizes how much sheer love and attention count for in a child's life."

Mothers, your teenage children also need that same kind of love and attention. It seems easier for many mothers and fathers to express their love to their children when they are young, but more difficult when they are older. Work at this prayerfully. There need be no generation gap. And the key is love. Our young people need love and attention, not indulgence. They need empathy and understanding, not indifference from mothers and fathers. They need the parents' time. A mother's kindly teachings and her love for and confidence in a teenage son or daughter can literally save them from a wicked world.

Blessings of the Lord upon Parents

In closing, I would be remiss this evening if I did not express my love and eternal gratitude for my sweetheart and companion and the mother of our six children. Her devotion to motherhood has blessed me and our family beyond words of expression. She has been a marvelous mother, completely and happily devoting her life and her mission to her family. How grateful I am for Flora!

May I also express my gratitude to you fathers and husbands assembled this evening. We look to you to give righteous leadership in your home and families and, with your companions and the mothers of your children, to lead your families back to our Eternal Father.

Now God bless our wonderful mothers. We pray for you. We sustain you. We honor you as you bear, nourish, train, teach, and love for eternity. I promise you the blessings of heaven and "all that the Father hath" (see D&C 84:38) as you magnify the noblest calling of all--a mother in Zion. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

The Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, also known as "Mother Zion", located at 140–148 West 137th Street between Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard and Lenox Avenue in the Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan, New York City, is the oldest African-American church in New York City, and the "mother church" of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion conference. The church was designated a New York City Landmark on July 13, 1993.