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First Things First

Michael W. Mosman

The question that brings us together tonight has bedeviled LDS graduate students for many years: how to balance the rigorous demands of graduate school, family, and church responsibilities. Looking as far back as the biography of J. Reuben Clark's public years, it has been a perennial struggle. Your presence here is a testament to your determination to meet it faithfully.

I vividly remember my own fears and the heartfelt conversations with my law school classmates as we talked in the hallways or pondered this challenge in the library at night. That was some time ago—as you can see just from looking at me—and we have met with varying degrees of success or failure in the ensuing years. Looking back, I can see that the way each of us chose to handle the demands of graduate school greatly foreshadowed the way we would respond to the demands of professional life. In other words, far more hung in the balance than I realized as we made decisions about how to live our lives during law school.

For most of us, graduate school presents dramatically increased demands on our time and abilities compared to our undergraduate experience. This was certainly true for me. After one week of law school, I felt a little like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* after the tornado set her down. I wasn't sure what had just happened, but I knew I was “not in Kansas anymore.” It is also not uncommon, at least early on, to believe that you have been mistakenly placed in some highly advanced class in which almost everyone else has had the prerequisites, which you somehow missed. I remember feeling that it was a little unfair to put me in law school with people who obviously had practiced law somewhere for several years.

The temptation in such a setting is to decide that graduate school will require an all-out effort with nothing held back. With that in mind, I have

set up my remarks as a series of three questions or concerns. These are posed by a hypothetical student I will call James (see Doctrine and Covenants 39; 40), who has tentatively decided to devote all of his time and talents to success in graduate school, while putting church and family obligations “temporarily” on the back burner. My own responses follow. As my children can attest, my answers typically go on a lot longer than the initial question.

James: Don’t make such a big deal out of this. It’s not like I’m going to leave the Church or something. I know it’s true. I just need to focus on my schooling for a limited period of time, and if I do, it will set my family up for the rest of our lives. What’s wrong with that?

Response: Implicit in your question is the idea that there is something unique or unusual about the demands of graduate school that justifies relaxing our covenants with the Lord during that time. The assumption is that you are not seeking permanent retirement from service in the kingdom, but a brief sabbatical. The fundamental premise of this question is that you are facing a once-in-a-lifetime challenge that you will never face in quite the same way again.

That premise is false.

The temptation to put the Church on the back burner to study in graduate school is no different in quality or intensity than the temptation to do so in order to start a small business, gain a promotion, prepare for a jury trial, or maintain a tenuous hold on a job during a recession.

I use the word “temptation” deliberately. It is important not to delude ourselves that this desire to put school temporarily ahead of church and even family is some deep philosophical quandary or Abrahamic test. At bottom, it is nothing more glamorous than a temptation. Your professors have subtly planted in you the twin seeds of ambition and fear. Some of you have listened and have begun to feel the unappeasable hunger of a desire for worldly success and its dark side, the fear of failure—that is, the fear of being little in the world’s eyes. As you must know, if you give in to these temptations this time, it will only be more difficult to resist the next time around. There will be many occasions where the temptation to put your pride and fear ahead of your family and church will be as acute as anything you feel in graduate school.

Let me use a personal example. As a young associate in a large law firm, I was pulling the laboring oar in a lawsuit that threatened to unravel a large corporate merger and do great harm to one of the firm’s major clients. In addition, the basis of the suit involved allegations that our firm had made serious mistakes in a securities offering. Two of the principal partners of the firm, the men who signed my paychecks and decided if I got to come to work the next week, were overseeing the case. We worked endless, tense

hours. I recall coming home one night quite late and being so irritated that I had not been able to mow my lawn that I turned on the porch light and mowed it while still in my suit.

The two partners and I met one Saturday. The court hearing that would effectively decide the case was early the next week. I was fully prepared, but more out of panic than necessity, the partners set another lengthy strategy session for Sunday. I had not worked on Sunday through law school and federal court clerkships, and I did not want to start then. At the same time, I was not blind to the fact that the men calling the meeting held my career in their hands, and they were not likely to be impressed that I had a Sunbeam class to teach. I could not be sure of the outcome when I told them I was ready for the hearing, that I had other obligations on Sunday, and that I could not make the meeting.

I tell this story not to talk about the Sabbath but to show that in your careers there will be instances where the pressure to make exceptions to your gospel commitments can be very great. Those who establish their response to such pressure while still in school will find themselves better able to withstand the pressure later.

In sum, the premise of this first question is false. You think this is a one-shot deal. In reality, it is simply the first of many tests of your commitment.

The concept of taking a sabbatical from full commitment to the demands of discipleship is invalid for another reason. It misapprehends our relationship with the Lord and his Church. A vacation or sabbatical is for employees. But our connection to the Lord is described in scripture as a marriage. We would not say to our spouse: "I will always be faithful to you, except while I am in law school. I know you'll understand." Similarly, the Lord searches for those who will serve him no matter what the hazard.

There is yet another danger. We are responsible not only for what we do, but for what we fail to do. Who knows what divine purposes brought you here to this university at this time? Who can say what great service you could render while you are here? Many of you come with gifts, talents, and energy that could be put to extraordinary use in this part of the kingdom. Single-minded pursuit of success in graduate school may cause you to miss many chances to bless the lives of those around you.

I have felt, and still feel, the great weight of things I have failed to do. It was mentioned that I was a law clerk at the Supreme Court. This was an extraordinarily busy year of my life. During that same time, I lived in a ward in Alexandria, Virginia, that experienced numerous convert baptisms of people who had just come to this country from Liberia. I was assigned to home teach a fairly new convert who had been brought into the Church by a great member missionary named Emmanuel Dufur Donka. During a particularly busy time, I missed home teaching this new brother one month. I hasten to add that I was taught better by my father, and this was the first

time this had ever happened to me. The next month, I tried to arrange a visit. During that time, he had quit coming to church, and had moved, and I could not find him. That experience, deeply painful to me to this day, brought home to me what President Taylor taught: that we must answer for those who were within our sphere of influence whom we failed to help.¹

There is another, even more fundamental reason to avoid spiritual sabbaticals. They can result in an undetected yet dangerous weakening of our testimonies. Most of us have an emotional attachment to having a testimony. Once we gain a testimony, we do not like to think of ourselves as having lost it. For this reason, many people do not face the fact that their testimony is dying until it is almost too late. Recently I have learned a little about concrete. One of the things I learned is that a crack in the concrete is often not the first sign of a small problem but nearly that last sign of a very big problem. Testimonies can be the same way. President Lee once said that a testimony “is as hard to hold as a moonbeam.”² For some of us, that light is very nearly extinguished before we acknowledge there is a problem.

What to do about the loss of testimony is the subject of another day. But if it is happening to you, do not deceive yourself. You are not losing your testimony because your newly honed powers of reasoning have cast the gospel in a harsher light. If I have learned anything in the practice of law, it is that the so-called “powers of reason” serve the purposes of liars and self-deceivers at least as well as they serve the purposes of honest men. If your testimony is dying, it is because you have neglected it.

It is my firm belief that the very things we hold back from God eventually become the source of some of our greatest sorrow. Do not hold back your school years. The law has been called a jealous mistress. As with any mistress, you will, if you give in to her, eventually despise her. I predict that if you hold back your graduate school years from God, you will eventually come to loathe your career. Its shrill demands will become odious to you. Put them on the altar instead, and let God sanctify them for you.

Finally, unless you are aware, you will permanently lose precious family moments. They go, and they do not come back. Each child, at each stage, is like a beautiful mirage, melting into the next phase and never to be captured again. Do not squander any stage; the memory of them will one day be more precious to you than diamonds, and your absence from any of them will weigh heavily on your heart.

I know of a man who turned down lucrative job offers in major eastern cities in order to come to a smaller western city where he could spend more time with his family. The difference between the highest offer he turned down and the one he took was about \$52,000. Knowing that he would probably have most of his weekends free, he referred to it as “a thousand dollars a Saturday.” This man chose wisely. I have had many Saturdays that I would not trade for a thousand dollars. Over the course of your careers,

you will learn that you can exchange your time for money. Try to learn the corollary expressed by Chief Justice Rehnquist that you can also exchange your money for time.

James: I would like to live my religion fully, but I am afraid. Graduate school is hard. What if I don't graduate high in my class? What if I don't finish at all? How will I get a job? If I don't give it everything I've got, what will become of me?

Response: I don't know. But when faced with a significant challenge, you can trust in your own strength, or you can trust in the Lord. I never had so much confidence in my own intelligence and abilities that I felt I could go toe-to-toe with the competition with only my wits to back me up. I knew I needed the Lord's help.

James: But some who do as you say don't do well, and they struggle to find jobs.

Response: True. It is misleading to think that if you put the Lord first during school that you will be a big success and become rich and famous. There are, in fact, great numbers of righteous Saints in all walks of life who have accomplished less than they might have in their public lives because of their commitment to the Church and their families. It is true, as has been said, that religious devotion is no excuse for professional mediocrity. But while it does not excuse mediocrity, it can keep us from the pinnacle. Faithful Saints, including some of you, experience struggles and setbacks and even failure. But their overwhelming testimony is that God has helped them and blessed them in priceless ways that they would not have known otherwise. And when trials come—the wayward child, the bout with cancer, the financial reversal—they know where to turn and in whom they have put their trust. They know where to find him, because they have steadfastly been true to him.

I challenge you to compare their lives to the empty existence of so many of the senior partners I have known, who have given up everything for their careers. In the end, it has left them with nothing that lasts, and it shows in their eyes.

John Lund, who once served here as a bishop, taught that we should never abandon what we know because of what we don't know. You don't know what will happen in your careers if you keep God first, and you have no promise that you will be either rich or famous. But you do know that this is God's church and kingdom, that your time on this earth is precious, and that you are here to prove that you will freely choose God over the honors of this world.

Ultimately the choice, as Elder Packer has said, is not between fame and obscurity, or between wealth and poverty, but between good and evil.³

Don't get me wrong. I love my work; I consider it a great privilege to have the job I do. But at a very fundamental level, I do not care if my commitment to the Savior costs me success in my profession. As Paul said, I would suffer "the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ" (Philippians 3:8). But let me say also to you that my witness, and the witness of many others who could stand before you, is that in trying to put God and family first, God has sanctified my career for me—given me greater opportunities for service, enhanced my abilities, and protected me from harm. In short, I have been utilized by him, even in my career, to help build the kingdom of God on the earth. May he do so for you, and may you allow him to do so, is my prayer.

This stake fireside address was given to University of Idaho and Washington State University graduate students in October 1992. Reprinted from the Clark Memorandum, Fall 1999, 41–43.

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Notes

1. "If you do not magnify your callings, God will hold you responsible for those whom you might have saved had you done your duty." *Journal of Discourses*, 20:23.

2. J. M. Heslop, "President Harold B. Lee Directs Church; Led By The Spirit," *Church News*, 15 July 1972, 4.

3. Boyd K. Packer, "The Choice," *Ensign*, Nov. 1980, 21.