

Work and Self Reliance Grant

[Teachings: Heber J. Grant](#)

Chapter 12: Work and Self-Reliance

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Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Heber J. Grant, (2011), 109–18

The Lord will bless us as we work to the full extent of our ability.

From the Life of Heber J. Grant

President Heber J. Grant often preached the principles of hard work and self-reliance. He counseled: “Let every man feel that he is the architect and builder of his own life, and that he proposes to make a success of it by working. ‘Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work,’ and rest on the seventh [see [Exodus 20:9–11](#)]. Do not be willing to labor four or five days and then only half labor. Let every Latter-day Saint give value received for everything he gets, whether it be in work, or whatever he does.”¹

When President Grant spoke of the value of work, he spoke from lifelong experience. As the only child of his widowed mother, he learned early to sweep floors and to wash and wipe dishes. He also helped his mother in her work as a seamstress to support the two of them. “I sat on the floor at night until midnight,” he later remembered, “and pumped the sewing machine to relieve her tired limbs.”² Heber’s efforts to assist his mother continued past his childhood, as he entered the world of business in his youth to help support her.

One of President Grant’s greatest desires was to “impress upon the minds of the youth of Zion the eloquence, the inexpressible eloquence of work.”³ In a series of articles for the Church’s Improvement Era magazine, President Grant related personal experiences, illustrating how his willingness to work led to early success in the business world. “I shall do so,” he said, “not for the purpose of throwing bouquets at myself, figuratively speaking, but with the hope that I may inspire my readers with a desire to labor. It is admitted that statements of personal experience, spoken or written, carry more force, and make a more lasting impression upon the minds of hearers and readers than can be made in any other way. This must be my excuse for relating so many incidents in my own career.

“When [I was] a youth, attending school, a man was pointed out to me who kept books in Wells, Fargo and Co’s. Bank, in Salt Lake City, and it was said that he received a salary of one hundred and fifty dollars a month. Well do I remember figuring that he was earning six dollars a day, Sundays omitted, which seemed to me an enormous amount. . . . I dreamed of being a book-keeper, and of working for Wells, Fargo & Co., and immediately joined the book-keeping class in the Deseret University [now the University of Utah], in the hope some day of earning what I thought at that time to be an immense salary.

“I quote with pleasure ... from Lord Bulwer Lytton: ‘What man wants is not talent, it is purpose; not power to achieve, but the will to labor.’ Samuel Smiles has said: ‘Purposes, like eggs, unless they are hatched into action, will run into decay.’

“Lord Lytton took it for granted undoubtedly that where a youth dreamed nobly and manfully, that it would inspire him to have a purpose in life, and to ‘hatch the same into action,’ and not allow it to ‘run into decay.’ Having purposed to become a book-keeper, I immediately set to work to attain this object. Well do I remember the amusement I furnished my fellow-students. One remarked when looking at my books, ‘What is it; hen tracks?’ Another said, ‘Has lightning struck an ink bottle?’ These remarks and others, while not made to hurt my feelings but in good-natured fun, nevertheless cut deep, and aroused within me a spirit of determination. I resolved to live to set copies for all who attended the university, and to be the teacher of penmanship and book-keeping in that institution. Having a purpose and also ‘the will to labor,’ and agreeing with Lord Lytton that, ‘In the bright lexicon of youth there’s no such word as fail,’ I commenced to employ my spare time in practicing penmanship, continuing year after year until I was referred to as ‘the greatest scribbler on earth.’

“The result was that some years later, I secured a position as book-keeper and policy clerk in an insurance office. Although at fifteen, I wrote a very nice hand, and it was all that was needed to satisfactorily fill the position which I then held, yet I was not fully satisfied but continued to dream and ‘scribble,’ when not otherwise occupied. I worked in the front part of A. W. White & Co’s. bank, and, when not busy, volunteered to assist with the bank work, and to do anything and everything I could to employ my time, never thinking whether I was to be paid for it or not, but having only a desire to work and learn. Mr. Morf, the book-keeper in the bank, wrote well, and took pains to assist me in my efforts to become proficient as a penman. I learned to write so well that I often earned more before and after office hours by writing cards, invitations, etc., and making maps, than the amount of my regular salary. Some years later, a diploma at the Territorial Fair was awarded me for the finest penmanship in Utah. When I engaged in business for myself, there was a vacancy at the university in the position of teacher of penmanship and book-keeping, and to make good the promise to myself, made when a youth of twelve or thirteen, that I would some day teach these branches, I applied for the situation. My application was accepted, and my obligation to myself was thus discharged.”⁴

President Grant had “the will to labor” in his spiritual endeavors as well as his temporal pursuits. He was an untiring worker as a father, a gospel teacher, and a special witness of the Lord [Jesus Christ](#). All aspects of his life reflected a principle he often taught: “The law of success, here and hereafter, is to have a humble and a prayerful heart, and to work, work, WORK.”⁵ He counseled: “If you have ambitions, dream of what you wish to accomplish and then put your shoulder to the wheel and work. Day-dreams without work do not amount to anything; it is the actual work that counts. Faith without works is dead, so James tells us, as the body without the spirit is dead [see [James 2:17, 26](#)]. There are any number of people who have faith, but they lack the works, and I believe in the people that have both the faith and the works and are determined to do things.”⁶

Teachings of Heber J. Grant

We should work to the full extent of our ability.

We should have an ambition, we should have a desire to work to the full extent of our ability. Work is pleasing to the Lord.⁷

I have never seen the day when I was not willing to do the meanest [or lowliest] work, (if there is such a thing as mean work, which I doubt) rather than be idle.⁸

I took the trouble this morning to read in the [Doctrine and Covenants](#) regarding the idler, and we have some idlers in our midst. We find in Section 75 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

“Let every man be diligent in all things. And the idler shall not have place in the Church, except he repent and mend his ways.” [[D&C 75:29.](#)] ...

In Section 88, we read:

“Cease to be idle; cease to be unclean; cease to find fault one with another; cease to sleep longer than is needful; retire to thy bed early, that ye may not be weary; arise early, that your bodies and your minds may be invigorated.” [[D&C 88:124.](#)]

Please remember that these are not the statements of Heber J. Grant, but they are the statements of the Lord:

“And the inhabitants of Zion also shall remember their labors, inasmuch as they are appointed to labor, in all faithfulness; for the idler shall be had in remembrance before the Lord.

“Now I, the Lord, am not well pleased with the inhabitants of Zion, for there are idlers among them; and their children are also growing up in wickedness; they also seek not earnestly the riches of eternity, but their eyes are full of greediness.” [[D&C 68:30–31.](#)]

“Thou shalt not be idle; for he that is idle shall not eat the bread nor wear the garments of the laborer.” [[D&C 42:42.](#)] ...

“Behold, they have been sent to preach my gospel among the congregations of the wicked; wherefore, I give unto them a commandment, thus: Thou shalt not idle away thy time, neither shalt thou bury thy talent that it may not be known.” [[D&C 60:13.](#)] ...

Let us hope that that spirit of independence that was with our pioneer fathers may be re-awakened in us, and that none who are Latter-day Saints holding the Priesthood of God will be guilty of being idle. Let us work early and let us work late.⁹

There is a spirit growing in the world today to avoid giving service, an unwillingness to give value received, to try to see how little we can do and how much we can get for doing it. This is all wrong. Our spirit and aim should be to do all we possibly can, in a given length of time, for the benefit of those who employ us and for the benefit of those with whom we are associated.

The other spirit—to get all we can, and give as little as possible in return—is contrary to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁰

I have endeavored to impress upon the minds of the youth the necessity of their working to the extent of their ability; and also while so laboring never to become disheartened. ...

“Arise, therefore, and be doing, and the Lord will be with you.” [See [1 Chronicles 22:16](#).] ...

I have found nothing in the battle of life that has been of more value to me than to perform the duty of today to the best of my ability; and I know that where young men do this, they will be better prepared for the labors of tomorrow. ...

At nineteen [years of age], I was keeping books and acting as policy clerk for Mr. Henry Wadsworth, the agent of Wells, Fargo & Co. My time was not fully employed. I was not working for the company but for the agent personally. I ... volunteered to file a lot of bank letters, etc., and to keep a set of books of the Sandy Smelting Co., which Mr. Wadsworth was doing personally.

To emphasize the truth of the above quotation from 1 Chronicles, I will remark that my action so pleased Mr. Wadsworth that he employed me to do the collecting for Wells, Fargo & Co., and paid me twenty dollars for this work in addition to my regular compensation of seventy-five dollars from the insurance business. Thus I was in the employ of Wells, Fargo & Co., and one of my day dreams had become a reality.

When New Year’s eve arrived, I was at the office quite late. ... Mr. Wadsworth came in and pleasantly remarked that business was good, that it never rains but it pours, or something to this effect. He referred to my having kept the books of the Sandy Smelting Co. without compensation, and said a number of complimentary things which made me very happy. He then handed me a check for one hundred dollars which doubly compensated me for all my extra labor. The satisfaction enjoyed by me in feeling that I had won the good will and confidence of my employer was worth more to me than twice one hundred dollars.

Every young man who will endeavor to employ all his time, never stopping to count the amount of compensation he is to receive for his services, but rather be inspired with a desire to labor and learn, I promise, will achieve success in the battle of life.¹¹

Work helps us be self-reliant.

There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven, upon which all blessings are predicated, and no man will get the blessing without fulfilling the law [see [D&C 130:20–21](#)]. I wish to impress upon the Latter-day Saints that we get in this life what we work for, and I want to urge every Latter-day Saint to be a worker.¹²

Our primary purpose [in establishing the Church’s [welfare program](#)] was to set up, in so far as it might be possible, a system under which the curse of idleness would be done away with, the evils of a dole abolished, and independence, industry, thrift and self respect be once more established amongst our people. The aim of the Church is to help the people to help themselves. Work is to be re-enthroned as the ruling principle of the lives of our Church membership.

Our great leader, Brigham Young, under similar conditions, said:

“Set the poor to work—setting out orchards, splitting rails, digging ditches, making fences, or anything useful, and so enable them to buy meal and flour and the necessities of life.” [See Discourses of Brigham Young, sel. John A. Widtsoe (1954), 275.]

This admonition is as timely today as when Brigham Young made it.¹³

Let all of us be industrious and useful to the full extent of our strength and ability. We are told to earn our bread by the sweat of the brow [see [Genesis 3:19](#)].

... It is an easy thing to throw a dollar to a man, but it requires sympathy and a heart to take an interest in him and try to plan for his welfare and benefit. And it is a principle of the gospel of Jesus Christ, now, as it always has been, to help every man to help himself—to help every child of our Father in heaven to work out his own salvation, both temporally and spiritually.¹⁴

I desire to call attention to a statement by President Brigham Young:

“My experience has taught me, and it has become a principle with me, that it is never any benefit to give out and out, to man or woman, money, food, clothing, or anything else, if they are able-bodied and can work and earn what they need, when there is anything on earth for them to do. This is my principle and I try to act upon it. To pursue a contrary course would ruin any community in the world and make them idlers.” [See Discourses of Brigham Young, 274.]

And what would ruin a community would ruin a state, and I might incidentally remark, a nation also.¹⁵

We are going to instill in the minds of the people as far as possible that statement by Brigham Young ... to the effect that it was his policy not to give anybody anything unless he earned it; that people must do something to earn that which they receive. Nothing destroys the individuality of a man, a woman, or a child as much as the failure to be self-reliant.¹⁶

Work is a lifelong responsibility.

Work is what keeps people young. Loafing is what starts to weaken them from the time they stop working. President Young was in active, vigorous life when he passed away, but appendicitis ended his life. His successor, John Taylor, was seventy-three years of age when he was made the President of the Church. John Taylor’s successor, Wilford Woodruff, was eighty-odd years of age when he became the President of the Church, and according to some, he ought to have retired over twenty years before that time. ... Lorenzo Snow came to the presidency of this Church as active as any young man, and with matured judgment, at eighty-five years of age, and when the Church was in a slough of despond financially, from which he rescued it. During his three years of administration, until he was eighty-eight years of age, his mind was as clear and active as that of any man who ever presided over this Church.

Joseph F. Smith, according to many people, was two years past the age when he should have retired, when he became the President of this Church, and the same is true of me. Next month, according to some people, it will be twenty-two years since I should have retired.¹⁷

I do not ask any man or child in this Church, although I am more than eighty years of age, to work any more hours than I do. ... I do not know of anything that destroys a person's health more quickly than not working.¹⁸

I believe there may be a disposition on the part of some Latter-day Saints to say, "Well, after we get to be sixty-five, we will not have to work any more." ... I have done just as much work for the past sixteen years, since I passed sixty-five, as I ever did before. And with the blessings of the Lord, if He will let me stay here another fifteen or sixteen years—which I doubt—I want to do just as much if not a little more than I have done in the last sixteen years. I am a firm believer that work does not kill anyone, but that laziness does kill a man at an early age.

There should be in the heart of every man and woman, the cry, "I am going to live. There is nothing given to me but time in which to live, and I am going to endeavor each day of my life to do some labor which will be acceptable in the sight of my Heavenly Father, and if it is possible, do a little better today than I did yesterday."¹⁹

Suggestions for Study and Discussion

- What can we do in our families to ensure that work is a ruling principle of our lives? In what ways can parents teach their children to work?
- How can we find dignity in all the work we do? What can we learn or gain from work even when it is unpleasant or disagreeable?
- In the process of realizing his dream to earn a good salary, what other rewards did young Heber J. Grant receive? What are some rewards you have received as a result of education and hard work?
- Why is it important for us to work for what we receive? How can failure to be self-reliant affect us individually? as families? in our communities and nations?
- How does work affect the mind, body, and spirit? What have you learned from people who have continued to work throughout their lives?