

08- You can't fool the chickens

Elder / Sister xxxxx,

One of the most important lessons I have ever learned in my life was from my children. I have called that experience YOU CAN'T FOOL THE CHICKENS. I think it relates very well to missionary work. The mission president does not have to be with you every minute to know what kind of job you are doing as a missionary. It becomes very obvious after a few months. But most of all it becomes obvious to the Lord every minute of every day. Here is my story:

The most important thing in my life is my family. I love my family and I want the very best for them. I have felt ever since the day our first son was born that one of the greatest gifts I could give to each of my children would be to teach them how to be hard workers. I have seen common people climb to uncommon heights in all walks of life just by being hard workers. They are not smarter than the other people, they just work harder and pass the rest up.

When my children became old enough to walk, I started helping them learn to work. Work hard. I tried to find jobs for them to do that were not easy. I knew that would help them learn to do the job anyway, even if they did not want to. But how many times can six children mow the lawn, do the dishes and clean their room in one day. Living in the city, in a subdivision was not making it easy for me to find "HARD" work for them to do. Hard work like a farmers kids do. I read somewhere that they did a study and found that farmers children were the most likely to succeed than the children of parents with any other occupation. The second most likely child to succeed was one who had a paper route as a youth. Both those jobs for children indicated to me that hard work would enhance my children's chances for success in life. I could see that if they had to do something like get up at 4:30 a.m. to milk cows or deliver papers, even if it was cold and snowing, they would learn a lesson I could not teach them any other way. But how many cow milking jobs are there in the city. And even though more likely, how many paper jobs are there in one neighborhood.

When my oldest son was about 12 years old, I had the good fortune of meeting a neighbor who had a huge empty lot behind his house. The empty lot was about one full acre. And he had irrigation water rights for it. You can't raise a garden if you don't get water for it. Boy that was like finding a gold mine for me. I could see now how we could plant a huge garden and have animals. My children could actually become little farmers. It truly was an answer to prayers for me.

That summer we all pitched in and tilled up the weeds and made ditches for the water. We planted more garden than I ever knew could be planted by one family. We bought some goats, rabbits and chickens. We were in the farm business right in the middle of Salt Lake City, Utah. I was thrilled beyond measure. Too bad my kids were not so thrilled. It was a lot of hard work. I know they were not as happy as me about the whole thing. But I saw it as the golden opportunity to help my children learn to work.

We lived about one mile from the garden. So we let the children walk or ride their bikes to the garden every day. I did not want their mother to have to start a mother's taxi thing for

them every day. Each day they were expected to work for two hours in the garden before they could go out to play.

We decided to assign each child a specific job. They are each 2 years apart in age so some were able to do harder work than others. There were three main jobs that needed to be done every day. One was to weed the garden, another was to water the garden and third was to water and feed the animals. The goats were on chains around the edge of the garden. Each child had a job that they could do that would help them learn to work but not be too hard for them. At least I thought the jobs were not "TOO" hard. But they certainly were not easy.

My oldest son Gene was assigned to take care of the chickens. Now I grew up on a farm and so I knew a little bit about chickens and how to raise them. There are four fundamental principles that you have to tend to if you want to get any eggs to eat. First you have to give them the right amount of food every day. Second you have to make sure they always have water. Third, you have to keep the eggs gathered every day. If you leave eggs in the nest then they will stop laying eggs. That is because the hens will start to sit on the eggs to try to hatch them. And fourth you have to have a place for them to lay the eggs where you can find them. If you do not do that, the chickens will go lay the eggs in the grass all over the garden. That makes them very hard for you to find the eggs to gather them.

So it was my oldest son's duty to take care of the chickens. We knew the chickens would need a place to sleep and lay eggs, so we built a nice chicken coop for them where they could roost at night and lay the eggs. All he had to do every day was go to the chicken yard, feed the chickens the correct amount of food, make sure all the water trays were full, and gather the eggs from the nests. I guess there was one other duty he had to do. He had to get the eggs home safe without breaking them.

Gene was probably the hardest worker of all the kids. He even seemed to like to work, especially when I would work right along with him. We had a lot of fun to gather at our garden. All of the children worked hard even the very young ones. But there was one small problem with the hard work Gene did. He was a great starter on a job but he always had a hard time finishing a job. It was just a bad habit he had. It was hard to stay with the job until it was done. That was one of the things I loved about our garden. I knew it would help me teach Gene and all the other kids to be hard workers and learn how to finish a job once they started it. But the harder I tried to teach that to Gene, the more it seemed to not work with him. He would go to the garden every day. He never missed. But every day when I checked up on his job, I would find that he had either watered the chickens and feed them but forgot to gather the eggs, or he would gather the eggs and water them but forget to feed them. He just could not seem to remember to do all three every day.

Now when you have a chicken that lays eggs for you, it will not lay one egg every day. A hen will normally only lay one egg every day and a half. We had twenty one chickens and they were laying an average of from fifteen to seventeen eggs a day. As you can see we really had them humming. They were top performers. That is why I checked on his job every day. If he missed one of the three things, I had to do it for him or they would stop laying. But I could not teach him to do all three every day for some reason. Try as I would, he would miss one of them quite often.

One day I was standing in the chicken yard looking over our little flock, and puzzling again because he had missed feeding them the night before. I was determined to find a way that I could help him learn to be consistent every day. Then the most wonderful idea came into my mind. An idea that I had learned about 20 years before from my aunt and uncle in Star Valley, Wyoming. They had taken a little plot of ground on their farm and had actually deeded it to their son Roy. Roy was about my same age. We were about 10 years old then. It was not a big plot of ground. Just a little garden sized piece of land about 100 feet by 100 feet. It was out behind their house.

After they deeded the ground to Roy, he then began to raise a garden on it. He would make money from it by raising vegetables and then his parents would purchase the vegetables from him instead of buying it from the store. Roy could then spend the money for anything he wanted. They lived way out in the middle of no-where in Wyoming, so the nearest big department store was the Sears and Penny's mail order catalog. I remember so well the great pride Roy took in that money he had earned. "IT WAS HIS ". And he could buy anything he wanted to with it. We spent hours looking through those catalogs trying to decide what to buy. And need I mention there was not a weed anywhere in his garden.

So as I stood there in the chicken yard that day, and that childhood memory came into my mind, I said "Why not?" Why wouldn't that work for my son? I decided to try it. So when he came to the chicken yard that evening, I told him my new wonderful plan. I told him that I was going to give him the chickens. They would be his very own chickens to own. And then I told him that we would buy the eggs from him every day. I told him that he would then have to take the money he made from selling us the eggs and buy the chicken feed for the chickens to eat each week. Then what ever money was left over would be his to keep. He could spend it any way he wanted. I was so amazed at how excited he was about it. You could see the dollar signs dinging in his eyes. He just knew that he had found a way to make his first fortune.

Days came and went as usual for all of us at the garden that summer, except for Gene and the chicken yard. I was so thrilled. He never missed. Eventually I was able to quit checking up on Gene every day to see if he had sure done his job. Each time I would check, just as I had hoped, all three jobs were done. He never missed. They were his chickens and he took even better care of them than I had done.

We put a little chart up on the refrigerator door at home. Each day when he brought the eggs home he would put them in the refrigerator and mark on the chart how many eggs he had gathered. We paid him a little more money than regular store prices for the eggs so he was sure to make money doing it. He was doing really quite well financially for a 12 year old.

Each week I would go with Gene to the feed store and help him buy one sack of feed for the chickens. That was just enough to last until the next week. He had more money to spend than any kid in the neighborhood could even hope to have as a 12 year old. I was thrilled beyond words at how well it was working.

After several weeks of successful work with the chickens, I began to notice a strange occurrence on the refrigerator door. The chart had a long list of numbers that went something like this: 18, 18, 17, 17,17, 16,16,16, 16, 15,15, 14,14,13,13,12,12..... I just

began to notice that the egg production was going down a little every week. Not a lot but a little each week. I did not say anything to him about it, but I knew what was happening. He was not out of feed at the end of each week like he should be. But they were his chickens and I wanted him to learn the lesson well in having them be his own chickens. It was like he had his own little business and we were both very happy.

As the weeks progressed, the numbers on the chart on the refrigerator door continued to go down. One week end when it was time to buy feed again I went over to the chicken yard to find him to take him to the feed store. I could tell that he was not very happy to see me when I entered the yard. I ask him if he was ready to go to the store to buy feed for the chickens. But he told me that we could not go. I asked him why. He said that he did not have enough money this week from the eggs to buy the feed. I knew he would not have enough money because there had been so few eggs that week, but I wanted to see if he knew why he did not have the money.

I asked him why he did not have enough money to buy the feed this week and he said he did not know. He said that the chickens had just not laid enough eggs, so he did not have the money. I asked him why the chickens had stopped laying and he said he did not know. He said he had feed them every day and never missed. He said he had watered them every day and never missed. He said he had gathered the eggs just like I told him every day and never missed. But for some reason they had stopped laying eggs. He said he did not know why they had stopped laying eggs.

Then I had an experience I will never forget the rest of my life. I asked him if he had cut down the amount of feed he had given the chickens every day. He got such a shocked look on his face when I asked him that question. It was like he did not think anyone would ever know what he had done. I remember so well his looking down at the ground and nervously kicking little rocks with his foot. Finally after a long silence, he looked completely away from me and said yes he had cut down the amount of feed he had been giving the chickens each day. I asked him why he had cut down the amount of food and he said that he thought if he gave them less food that then he would make more money. I then had this experience that I will never forget. I called him by his name so he would look back at me. I wanted him to look me in the eye, which he did. I then asked him if he thought he had been fooling me. He was almost in tears and he said that he thought he had fooled me. And then this powerful impression came into my mind and I heard the question in my mind. I asked him, "Did you fool the chickens?" I was just stunned at the question in my own mind. I was dumbfounded at the significance of it.. The very thought of it. You can fool everyone else, but you cannot fool the chickens. It literally changed my life from that moment forward.

I have seen literally thousands of applications of that life's lesson from the chicken yard that day. Everywhere I go I see people trying to fool the chickens. At work I learned very quickly that as a manager that I do not have to watch my workers. I can tell when they have been working. I know when they take two hours to do a fifteen minute job. I see over and over in life that you can't fool the chickens.

I have seen so many of my friends try to be unfaithful to their marriage partners. I have seen lots of friends try to be dishonest and get away with it. And they have, some of them, for a while. They thought they were fooling the chickens by deceiving those around them, at first. In some cases I even saw that they had been successful in fooling themselves. But in

the end they found out you can't fool the chickens. I guess it is the same lesson that was taught in the old saying, "what goes around comes around". So this is not some new lesson of life no one ever heard of before. I just learned it in what seem to me to be a profound parable of life. You can sometimes fool your parents or spouse. You can fool or lie to your church or community leaders. Your employer or your friends can sometimes be fooled for a while. But I know for certain, from many experiences in this life, that when all is said and done, you cannot fool God. You cannot fool Him now or on judgment day. If I do not know anything else in this life, one thing I do know is that you cannot fool God. If you try to live a double life His spirit will withdraw from you. The life you live will reflect the blessings you receive in every part of your life. It is the greatest life's lesson that I have ever learned in my life.

This experience I had with my family and the family garden has shown me once again that my wife and children have always been and will likely always be my greatest teachers.

Brother and Sister Vail

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