

AN OLIVE LEAF

“IF HE IS ALL RIGHT ON THE MAIN LINES”

By Brigham Young

Brigham Young was one of Mormonism's great extemporaneous speakers: “I will present such views as come to my mind.”

In this selection from The Essential Brigham Young (Signature Books, 1992, 239–41; published originally in the New York Herald, ca. September 1877), Young reflects on Joseph Smith and the qualities of humility and humor that enoble the human character. (Following the editorial choices of the Essential Brigham Young, in this passage we retain the same language constructions and variant spellings of the original).



ONE [OF THE THINGS THAT pains me] is to hear saints dwell on Joseph's little shortcomings, as if it made any sort of difference what the idiosyncracies of a prophet or any other man might be, if he is all right on the main lines. That is all we have any business with. There are some people that even grace can't haul up out of the slough of detail into the largeness of the spirit. I have no doubt that there were Israelites who refused to follow Moses because he did or did not part his hair in the middle, and some of that breed are handed down to the present time and are here with us now, and follow Brigham Young and shout, “Our servant Brigham is the Lion of the Lord,” and remember it against Joseph that he went with one suspender and forgot to put on the regulation Mormon underclothes. They think that if he had had his garments with the holes cut in the breasts and knees and elbows, he would not have got bullet holes in his body. . . .

[Some men have asked if Joseph Smith selected me for leader of the saints because of my humility.] Joseph's words were, “for humilty and obedience, I have found none like unto our brother Brigham.” These words have become for me a kind of test of men. When I see a saint full of himself, his own opinion and his own way, I find myself looking at him with the sad eyes of Joseph. It seems to me that humility and obedience are something very profound, and too deep for me. But Joseph

Smith was a poet, and poets are not like other men; their gaze is deeper, and reaches the roots of the soul; it is like that of the searching eyes of angels; they catch the swift thought of God and reveal it to us, even at the risk of forgetting their underclothes and their suspenders.

I have half a dozen children by different mothers that seem nearer alike and more attached to each other than almost any full brothers and sisters I could mention. I say seem, for a great deal of the difference between people is only seeming; the real character often lies below all the seeming—and when we get at that we find many people very much alike. Take my John W. and Brigham, Jr. Could any two children of the most different parents seem more unlike, yet in all the essentials of character, truthfulness, courage, love of God, and good will to men, there is not the choice of two peas between them; and there are hundreds of the Valley boys just the same. I think on the judgment day men will be called to account for only very few simple fundamental qualities, and all the peculiarities that catch the eye and engage the attention now will be swallowed up in death. But that is no reason why we shouldn't notice them in life, and rejoice in them, for it is only through them that we can tell t'other[?] from which.

Of all the qualities that will perish in the grave, I think humor is the best. Indeed, I'm not sure that it will not survive death, for it often hangs on to the last. I have known saints, the best of saints, too, whose last word was a joke, perhaps about not liking the prospect of their souls going naked into the other world, and before the joke was ended, they were dead. Perhaps they ended it on the other side. Who knows? It is all mystery. I used to run to humor in my sermons, and next day be sorry for it; but I found years after, when I had forgotten the sorrow and the sermons, that people remembered the humor. I sometimes think God must enjoy humor, and that he won't be strict in reckoning with a humorist.