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The Eternal Importance of Righteous Choices

The choices we make are critical—
they are the key to our future and happiness.

We live in a world that emphasizes diversity over unity. Many assume that it is virtually impossible for people from different cultures and diverse backgrounds to be united in common goals. Some have asserted, “We lack a unifying narrative to explain how a pluralistic people live” together.¹ Some believe “the world is determined by your single tribal identity. They describe society as a battleground” that “cultivate[s] mistrust, division and emotional frozenness.”²

A unifying answer to these assertions is the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Righteousness is the underlying principle that brings unity and happiness. I love 2 Nephi chapter 9, which contains incredible instruction about learning, wisdom, wealth, labor, and refusing to see or hear the consequences of sin. It contains profound doctrine that allows us to follow the paths of righteousness that lead to the Savior.

I will share five principles that I believe will contribute to your successful quest for faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, righteousness, and knowledge. These objectives can be compatible and complementary. At a practical level, many of you are preparing for family life and the means of supporting your family. Faith, righteousness, and knowledge will greatly assist you in both areas. Any honest labor is worthwhile and to be admired. Work that includes values, meaningfulness, and new ideas and that blesses mankind is particularly significant.

1. Continue to Learn

The first principle that I will share is to enthusiastically and righteously continue your quest for knowledge. One of my heroes in this category is Paul Cox, an active member of the Church. He received a bachelor of science degree from Brigham Young University in botany and earned other post-graduate degrees. He served a mission in Samoa and later lived with his family in Savai'i, Samoa, for many years. One of his focuses was ethnomedicine, in which he studied some of the plants that had been used by generations of Samoan mothers to treat health issues. With a coauthor, he wrote *Plants, People, and Culture: The Science of Ethnobotany*.³

He has made several breakthroughs in treating diseases. While he has done many things in his exceptional career, the one I wish to mention occurred many years ago. Paul and a Samoan chief, Fuiono Senio, conducted ethnobotanical research in the village of Falealupo, Western Samoa.

An account in *BYU Magazine* reported: "The village had reluctantly licensed its forest to a logging company to raise funds to build a school, because, says Cox, 'They felt they had to choose between their children and their forest, which was a terrible, terrible decision for them.' When he learned of the transaction with the logging company, Cox told the chiefs he would personally pay to build the school if they could stop the logging" of the rain forest.⁴

He did build the school with the help of businessmen who had connections with Samoa.⁵ Brother Cox has received many honors and awards, including the Goldman Environmental Prize for grassroots environmental heroes. He represents a continuing quest for knowledge to bless mankind. This account exemplifies the love of learning and the synergism of knowledge.



Knowledge, used righteously, whether old or new, is important.

President Russell M. Nelson, another of my heroes, was a pioneer in the development of open-heart surgery, which has significantly blessed those who live in our time. Some years ago, I asked him about the incredible history of open-heart surgery and his significant role in it. We discussed it for some time, and then he humbly stated, "How wonderful it is that the Lord, who knows all, allows us the great joy of discovering certain pieces of knowledge."

2 Nephi 9:29 reads, "But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God." Knowledge has always been important, and today we are at the threshold of many new and exciting scientific and technological advancements. Certainly, much of this will have enormous benefits for the Church and for the entire human family. Knowledge, used righteously, whether old or new, is important.

2. Righteous Choices Matter

Many years ago, Elder Bruce C. Hafen, now an emeritus member of the Seventy, shared a comical example of bad choices during a talk given in New Zealand. As I remember it, Cookie Monster (a famous *Sesame Street* character) had won a quiz

show, and he could choose among three choices for his prize. First, he could have a new house one month later. Second, he could have a new car one week later. Or third, he could have a magnificent cookie—right now! What do you think he chose? You are right—he chose the cookie!⁶

We laugh at this, but the choices we make are critical—they are the key to our future and happiness. Remember, we are the sum total of every decision we make. We live at a time when almost every choice is debated and dissected. Many people almost immediately oppose any righteous proposal or principle (see 2 Timothy 4:3). Near the end of his life, the prophet Lehi taught:

“For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. . . .

“Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself” (2 Nephi 2:11, 27).

Given the war in heaven over the plan of salvation (see Abraham 3), it is not surprising that the religious principles taught in this, the last dispensation, are attacked with malignant ferocity. But lest we be discouraged, let us remember the outcome of the War in Heaven and the wonderful outcome that we know will be ushered in with the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

A great enemy of good choices is rationalization. Many argue that we are not accountable for our choices. But because of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, we know that we *are* accountable (see Doctrine and Covenants 72:3). We also know to whom we must account. It is the Savior! (See 2 Nephi 9:41; see also Acts 4:12.)

Sometimes important choices are quite simple. As young missionaries serving in England, my companion and I had the opportunity to go to the temple. As we crossed the temple grounds, the temple president, Selvoy J. Boyer, walked toward us. Seeing our missionary badges, he pointed at us and asked, “Matthew 5:48—do you know that scripture?” My companion stated, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” President Boyer said, “That is correct. Elders, are you living that commandment?”

We started to stammer; we knew we were not perfect! He helped us. He asked questions about what we had done for the past three days. He asked about when we went to bed, when we got up, whether we had individual and companion scripture study, and whether we went proselyting on time. Then he said, “I am sure you are not perfect, but you have made perfect choices for the past three days, and that means you are moving in the right direction.” He left us thinking about the importance of what he had asked.

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Lehi issued this cry about choice, which every righteous father and mother echo to their sons and daughters: “I would that ye should look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit” (2 Nephi 2:28).

We need to understand that there is opposition in all things and that the righteous choices we make are critical.

When I was young, I was introduced to a statement by Harry Emerson Fosdick, a renowned Protestant minister. In speaking of choices, he said:

“The tragic evils of our life are so commonly unintentional. We did not start out for that poor, cheap goal. That aim was not in our minds at all. . . . That is why the road to hell is always paved with good intentions, and that is why I am not celebrating high ideals, lofty aims, fine purposes, grand resolutions, but am saying instead that one of the most dangerous things in the world is to accept them and think you

believe in them and then neglect the day-by-day means that lead to them. Ah, my soul, look to the road you are walking on! He who picks up one end of a stick picks up the other. He who chooses the beginning of a road chooses the place it leads to. It is the means that determines the end.”⁷

3. Give Day-to-Day Consecrated Effort

Righteous day-to-day consecrated effort is better than occasional heroic actions. A friend of mine, Jim Jardine, indicated in a lecture at Brigham Young University that when he was a student, he thought “of consecrating [his] life in one grand, heroic gesture” but came to realize that “consecration is not a once in a lifetime event; it is a daily devotion.”⁸

When I was young, I too wanted to prove myself through some heroic gesture. My great-grandfather David Patten Kimball was one of the young men who rescued and helped carry members of the Martin handcart

company across the Sweetwater River. That sounded like the kind of consecration for which I was looking. Later, as I visited with my grandfather Crozier Kimball, he explained that when President Brigham Young (1801–77) sent the men on their rescue mission, he instructed them to do everything they possibly could to save the handcart company. Their consecration was specifically to “follow the prophet.” My grandfather told me that consistent, faithful, righteous dedication to one’s duty or to a principle is to be much admired.

As heroic as it was for David Patten Kimball to help rescue the pioneers, it would be equally heroic today to follow the prophet by adhering to his counsel in reducing social media use, studying the Book of Mormon, and particularly helping to gather scattered Israel on both sides of the veil. If we help gather scattered Israel, we will be rescuing the souls of mankind—just as my great-grandfather helped to rescue the lives of the handcart company.

Some members of the Church profess that they would commit themselves with enthusiasm if given some great calling, but they do not find ministering or gathering family history sufficiently heroic for their sustained effort.

4. Be Strong and Immovable in Matters of Righteousness

A few years ago, Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was speaking about some of his personal friends who were less active in the Church. He said he had observed the ebb and flow of their faith and what the underlying cause was. Elder Maxwell then stated:

“A verse in the Book of Mormon offers the most satisfactory explanation. It is an

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interrogative in Mosiah 5:13: ‘For how knoweth a man the master whom he has not served, and who is a stranger unto him, and is far from the thoughts and intents of his heart?’

“This describes what usually happens: otherwise basically decent people simply get caught up with the cares of the world. If instead of drawing closer to the Master we become a stranger to Him, then we have lost our way. The decent people to whom this happens haven’t engaged in major transgression, as a rule, but they have distanced themselves from the Savior, and He has become a stranger to them.”⁹

It is essential that we place faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ at the center of our lives. A wonderful mission president had each of us missionaries memorize a simple statement

relating to faith and righteousness that has stayed with me all my life. I commend it to you:

*There is no chance, no destiny, no fate
[That] can circumvent or hinder or control
The firm resolve of a determined soul.¹⁰*

My dear friends, you need to be determined souls when it comes to living righteously!

5. Earn Your Heritage through Righteous Choices

One of the great accounts in the Book of Mormon is Alma’s counsel to his three sons—Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton. Alma was the son of Alma, the prophet. He experienced a miraculous conversion as a young man. He became the chief judge of the nation and the

Heroism can be found in the simple act of sustained ministering.



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high priest and prophet of the Church. Two of his sons had made good choices. But one son had made some very bad choices. To me the greatest significance of Alma’s counsel is that he was giving it as a father for his own children. His first concern was that they have a testimony of God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost.

Alma starts out in chapter 36 by telling Helaman of his miraculous conversion. An angel told Alma he would be destroyed if he continued to oppose the Church. He testifies that the knowledge he was sharing did not come from his own wisdom but was revealed to him from God. He wants Helaman to have a testimony.

Many of you, if not most, have a testimony. We each need a personal testimony. President Joseph F. Smith (1838–1919) said, “One fault to be avoided by the Saints, young and old, is the tendency to live on borrowed light [and] to permit . . . the light within them to be reflected, rather than original.”¹¹

President Heber C. Kimball (1801–68), a counselor to President Young, said:

“The time will come when no man nor woman

will be able to endure on borrowed light. Each will have to be guided by the light within himself. If you do not have it, how can you stand? . . .

“. . . If you don’t have it you will not stand; therefore seek for the testimony of Jesus and cleave to it, that when the trying time comes you may not stumble and fall.”¹²

The 76th section of the Doctrine and Covenants refers to the three degrees of glory and compares the celestial glory to the sun. Then it compares the terrestrial kingdom to the moon and the telestial kingdom to the stars (see also 1 Corinthians 15:41).

It is interesting that the sun has its own light, but the moon is reflected light or “borrowed light.” Speaking of those who inherit the terrestrial kingdom, verse 79 states, “These are they who are not valiant in the testimony of Jesus.” We cannot obtain the celestial kingdom and live with God the Father on borrowed light.

Be grateful if you have had goodly parents who have testimonies and have taught you the gospel. However, you need your own testimony. The philosopher Goethe said, “What from your father’s heritage is lent, earn it anew to really possess it.”¹³

Each individual has the responsibility to make righteous choices and to seriously ponder the five areas of advice I have set forth. Your principal goal is to build your personal faith. World conditions increasingly require deepening individual conversion to, and strengthening faith in, Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ and His Atonement.

Prepared for Perilous Times

The Church has made an incredible effort to give you a road map to assist you in making righteous choices. The Lord has prepared us, line upon line, for the “perilous times” (2 Timothy 3:1)

we now face. A short list of actions by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to provide this road map include the following:

- Honoring the Sabbath day and the sacred ordinance of the sacrament has again been emphasized for the past five years.
- Under the bishop’s direction, strengthened elders quorums and Relief Societies focus on the purpose and divinely appointed responsibilities of the Church, helping members make and keep sacred covenants.
- Ministering in a higher and holier way is being joyfully adopted.
- As we begin with the end in mind, temple covenants and family history service are becoming a purposeful part of the covenant path.

Additional adjustments to achieve a new balance between what happens at church and in the home were presented during the October 2018 general conference. Adjustments were presented to achieve a home-centered, Church-supported Sabbath effort. In the address I delivered, which was approved by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, we declared that the purposes and blessings associated with this adjustment and other recent changes include the following:

The Church has given us a road map to help us make righteous choices.



- Deepening conversion to Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and strengthening faith in Them.
- Strengthening individuals and families through home-centered, Church-supported curriculum that contributes to joyful gospel living.
- Honoring the Sabbath day, with a focus on the ordinance of the sacrament.
- Helping all of Heavenly Father’s children on both sides of the veil through missionary work and receiving ordinances and covenants and blessings of the temple.¹⁴

Righteously adhering to the counsel given will bless you now and throughout your life. ■

From devotional addresses given at Brigham Young University–Hawaii on November 20, 2018, and at the Utah Valley Institute of Religion on February 1, 2019.

NOTES

1. David Brooks, “The Rise of the Amphibians,” *New York Times*, Feb. 15, 2018, nytimes.com.
2. Brooks, “The Rise of the Amphibians.”
3. Michael J. Balick and Paul Alan Cox, *Plants, People, and Culture: The Science of Ethnobotany* (1996).
4. Julie Walker, “Professor and Samoan Chief Awarded for Saving Rain Forest,” *BYU Magazine*, Summer 1997, 8; see also, Anne Billings, “You Can Make a Difference: Paul Cox—Preserving God’s Creations,” *Liahona*, Nov. 1998, 32–37.
5. These included Church members Rex Maughan, Ken Murdock, and others.
6. See Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, “Bridle All Your Passions,” *Ensign*, Feb. 1994, 16.
7. Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Living Under Tension* (1941), 111.
8. James S. Jardine, “Consecration and Learning,” in Henry B. Eyring, ed., *On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar: Lectures Presented at the Brigham Young University Honors Program Discipline and Discipleship Lecture Series* (1995), 78.
9. Neal A. Maxwell, “Insights from My Life,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2000, 9.
10. Ella Wheeler Wilcox, “Will,” in Charles Wells Moulton, *The Magazine of Poetry: A Quarterly Review*, vol. 5 (1893). The mission president was Elder Marion D. Hanks.
11. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (1939), 87.
12. Heber C. Kimball, in Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 6th ed. (1975), 450.
13. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Bayard Taylor (1912), 1:28.
14. See Quentin L. Cook, “Deep and Lasting Conversion to Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2018, 8–11.