

Gospel Doctrines: Anchors to Our Souls

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Adapted from an address delivered at the 1998 Brigham Young University Women's Conference.

My formal training was not in the behavioral sciences, but I have spent much time trying to understand and change my own behavior and assist those around me to change theirs. From the scriptures I have learned that gospel teachings, sometimes called doctrines, are powerful shapers of human behavior.

President Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has stated the principle beautifully: “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior.”¹

A good example of this truth is found in the Old Testament story of Joseph, one of Jacob’s 12 sons, who resisted the temptation of Potiphar’s wife (see Genesis 39:7–12).



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Joseph's classic response to her enticement provides a model for all who encounter similar temptations. The record simply says, "He refused" (v. 8).

Joseph then explains his refusal:

"Behold, [Potiphar knoweth] not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand;

"There is none greater in this house than I, neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (vv. 8–9).

Joseph's rhetorical question not only speaks volumes about his sterling character but also helps explain why he had such character. Can there be any doubt that Joseph had been taught the doctrine that God is our Father, that we are His children, and that He has created a plan for our lives? In this telling moment, as Joseph wisely exercised his agency, he obviously wasn't worried about the possibility of disease, unwanted pregnancy, or even disappointing his earthly father. His thoughts and motives were much more noble—what would his Heavenly Father think? How could he possibly offend Him? The influence of doctrine on our behavior can be great and eternally beneficial.

Learning the Doctrine

Perhaps that is why early in this dispensation the Lord said to the Saints, "And I give unto you a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom" (D&C 88:77). Because we can't teach what we haven't learned, an important implication of this commandment is that we must acquire a basic knowledge of gospel doctrine in our heads and hearts.

We can draw on this knowledge in moments of personal need and when we want to teach the doctrines of the kingdom to others. Our knowledge will help save us, but each of us must pay the price to obtain it. To do so we may need to get up a little earlier, stay up a little later, or consistently sneak a few precious moments for study during the day. Whatever price we have to pay, it will be worth it. A determined effort to study gospel doctrine will also have the benefit of immersing us in a prime source of that doctrine—the scriptures.

Applying the Doctrine

Learning and teaching doctrine to our families is the greatest service we could ever render to them or anyone else because thereby faith in Christ increases and this is the surest anchor to our souls. When we begin to internalize the doctrines of the gospel—in Jeremiah's words, to put them in our "inward parts, and write [them] in [our] hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33)—it will not be long before we and those around us begin to notice changes in our behavior.

A controlling parent who comes to understand the doctrine of agency will cease that control.

A selfish and self-centered spouse who is touched by the power of the doctrine of charity will no longer seek his or her own interests (see Moroni 7:45).

An honest investigator who comes to fully understand the doctrine and blessings of baptism as taught by the missionaries will not only accept their invitation to be baptized but will also eagerly make all necessary preparations for the performance of the ordinance.

All of us who truly come to comprehend the matchless doctrine of the Atonement will appreciate the enormity of our debt to the Savior and will seek diligently to repay that debt with offerings of repentance, obedience to the commandments, and Christian service.

As we study and apply gospel doctrines in our lives, we will come to understand them in their relationship and necessary balance to each other. We will learn, for instance, that justice cannot be respected without a knowledge of the limitations of mercy; that agency operates best in a climate of kindness and unfeigned love; and that "repentance could not come unto men except there were a punishment" (Alma 42:16).

The Power of Doctrine

Perhaps the best measurement of how well we understand the doctrines of the gospel is how clearly and simply we teach them and live them. And live and teach them we must! (see Matthew 5:19; D&C 68:25). Is there a better way to tangibly express love to our families than to teach them the saving doctrines of the gospel?

The teaching of doctrine is accompanied by a special spirit and a power that are not usually present when the more mundane aspects of life are discussed. At the April 1990 general conference, Elder Carlos E. Asay (1926–99) of the Seventy gave a talk about the Prophet Joseph Smith.² His talk tugged at my heartstrings in an unusual and forceful way. When I encountered Elder Asay a few days after conference and expressed my feelings about the power his words had seemed to carry, he taught me a valuable lesson. “Haven’t you learned that there are certain gospel topics about which one can never give a poor talk?” he asked. “You can never give a poor talk about Joseph Smith and his divine calling.”

I have come to know that what Elder Asay taught me about Joseph Smith is true of every doctrine of the gospel. When we teach doctrine, an accompanying power and spirit will carry our teachings deep into the hearts of those we teach and will bring those teachings to their remembrance at appropriate and critical times (see Alma 31:5).

Examples of this truth in scripture are numerous. I cite my favorite, which is young Alma’s recounting the details of his conversion. He gives us a vivid description of the depth of his torment related to past transgressions and then says, “While I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins, behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world” (Alma 36:17).

Whenever I read this passage and realize that in his moment of extreme need, young Alma remembered his father’s teachings concerning the Atonement, I quietly wonder what, if anything, our children will ever remember of the doctrines my wife, Kathy, and I have attempted to teach them. Wouldn’t it be a wonderful thing to be remembered and quoted in this way by our children and grandchildren?

The truly noteworthy element in Alma’s story, however, isn’t that he remembered his father’s doctrinal teachings; rather, it is the change in his behavior that followed.

“And from that time [when he remembered his father’s teachings on the Atonement] even until now, I have labored

without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost” (Alma 36:24).

Alma’s experience also illustrates the important fact that so much of the behavior we hope for in our own lives and in the lives of others is related to personal conviction and understanding of Christ’s Atonement.

A Home Teaching Experience

Several years ago I had a confirming experience of my own concerning the transforming power of doctrine. It involved a less-active family to which I was assigned as a home teacher. I had been going to their home quite regularly for many years and usually shared a brief message but never really systematically taught them the doctrines of the kingdom. All the while this good couple was working on the challenges of a second marriage for each of them and the resulting financial and family stresses such arrangements can bring. They were good, honest people with little background in the gospel.

When Kathy and I returned home from a two-year mission in Rochester, New York, I asked this family if my young companion and I could teach them the doctrines of the gospel in an organized way. The wife’s reply still haunts me: “We always hoped you would do that.”

I’ll never forget the first night we really began to teach them gospel doctrines. We had a brief prayer and then I began. “You should know,” I said, “that God is our Father, that we are His children, that He loves us, and that because of that love He has created a plan for our lives.”

For the first time, as I taught that eager couple the doctrines of the kingdom, a spirit and power came into their home that in all my years of trying I had never been able to create.

To make a heartwarming story short, it wasn’t long before this couple began coming to church. Doctrine *does* change behavior! At church they were directed to a gospel essentials class and exposed in sacrament meeting

to gospel sermons. Two sister missionaries were invited to teach them more doctrine. A perceptive bishop extended a call to them to become our ward food storage coordinators. They accepted the call and became so enamored with our local cannery and the good people there that they agreed to serve a one-year welfare services mission, giving about 20 hours of service each week.

They are now attempting by precept and example to teach their children and grandchildren the doctrines of the kingdom. The husband even became one of our family's home teachers! I learned in a powerful way that an understanding of gospel doctrine changes behavior.

I share my witness that we must learn doctrine and

teach it. If we do so we will increasingly be found in our homes and elsewhere, as Nephi observed, "talk[ing] of Christ, . . . preach[ing] of Christ, prophesy[ing] of Christ, and . . . writ[ing] according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins" (2 Nephi 25:26).

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NOTES

1. Boyd K. Packer, "Do Not Fear," *Ensign*, May 2004, 79.
2. See Carlos E. Asay, "One Small Step for a Man; One Giant Leap for Mankind," *Ensign*, May 1990, 62–65.

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