

“To Obey Is Better Than Sacrifice”

DAVID MCPHERSON

Isn't this great! What a marvelous campus and community the Lord has provided us with through the dedication and faithfulness of his Saints. Indeed, this great campus is built upon the foundation of those who labored in the vineyards of the world. What a tremendous responsibility we have as an academic community to provide the best spiritual and academic education possible. As scholars in the Lord's university, what wonderful academic freedom we have to teach revealed truths and principles as part of our intellectual experiences and professional knowledge. How much our students miss when we fail to encapsulate intellectual and spiritual growth within our scholarly areas. Where else can we so completely fill the children of God with wonderment and truths? Where else can we challenge those who will shape the future of mortal existence with the ability to think clearly, to think precisely, and to understand the nature and beauty of our existence? What an opportunity we have of showing these young scholars who come to Brigham Young University that intellectualism is about recognizing kernels of truth, and then using that truth as a matter of inquiry in understanding and improving our existence.

Science, philosophy, and politics may not permit us in an imperfect world to use revealed

truth as a means of supporting a theoretical foundation, yet we can use revealed truth to seek ways in which we may establish such theories. Today science, as well as most areas, is troubled with falsifications, deceptions, and lies. Sports are plagued with selfishness, and commerce is plagued with profiteering. Isaiah was so clear when he wrote: “Yea, they are greedy dogs which can never have enough, and they are shepherds that cannot understand: they all look to their own way, every one for his gain, from his quarter” (Isaiah 56:11).

Our quarter is the Lord's quarter—not that of our professional peers nor of sports idols nor of the boardrooms of industry. It is the Lord's quarter. As professors and students at Brigham Young University, we have a tremendous obligation to keep that reality in the foremost center of our ideology and teaching. When we fail to do this, when we fail to be guided and obedient to correct principles, we lead ourselves, and frequently others, to failure. Truth is exacting. It is unchanging. If we understand that principle we can contribute to both the Lord's plan and to

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society. If we accept that principle we can move forward in great strides, accomplishing much. But if we “kick against the pricks” (Acts 9:5), our energy becomes dispersed and we lose that momentum, ending up with a distorted and unclear view. As Christ taught, we fall amongst the thorns and are “choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection” (Luke 8:14).

Robert A. Millikan, a noted and highly decorated physicist who spent much of his life bringing science and society together, wrote in 1922: “The salvation of the world is to be found in the cultivation of science together with the cultivation of a belief in the reality of moral and spiritual values” (Robert A. Millikan, “Address of Acceptance of the Norman Bridge Laboratory of Physics,” *Science* 55, no. 1422 (31 March 1922), p. 332).

Yet in our universities we frequently see the antithesis of Millikan’s observation. When I was a faculty member at the University of California, Irvine, the student newspaper published an editorial written by one of the student editors. The student editor was expounding on how to have a day off from the pressures of examinations for the cost of a single matinee theater ticket. In the editorial he stated how to avoid getting caught between showings in a multiscreen theater. Placed in proper context, he was teaching how to steal.

Is one’s integrity and standing before the Lord worth the price of a movie theater ticket? Is honesty so complicated that it is based upon one’s perceived needs or entitlement? I wonder how this story might have been different if a professor had taught in the classroom gospel principles that we are permitted and expected to teach in our classrooms. Or if another student had recognized such flaws in a friend’s character and had the courage to teach correct principles? The media is filled daily with such examples of dishonesty from those we entrust with power. How easy we confuse good for evil and evil for good. How quick we are to

blame others for our actions or the consequences that our actions bring. Cassius, in the opening act of *Julius Caesar*, is talking to Brutus and says:

*Men at some time are masters of their fates:
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.*
[William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, act 1, scene 2, lines 138–40]

We have been given a sacred trust at Brigham Young University as a learning community. We must not violate that trust but honor and build upon it.

As a bishop of a Brigham Young University student ward, I had a long and soul-searching conversation with a young freshman student who could only see one focused purpose for being at this campus. Religious education and spiritual growth were not part of that focus—nor were the expectations of conduct he had agreed to upon accepting his scholarship and admittance to BYU. He was now faced with the necessity of leaving the university. I was told I was responsible for destroying his chance at greater honors and awards. This was the whole of his life! His order of conduct away from Brigham Young University was no business of mine, of the Church, nor of the university. He signed the Honor Code because he was “forced” to, or he would not be able to attend BYU and accomplish his goals. Although perhaps not at a conscious level, deceptions and “small lies” were to him an appropriate means to accomplish his goals. It happens subtly over a period of time until lies and deceptions are part of us. It becomes not only acceptable, but an automated approach to obtaining what we think we deserve. This same message is delivered within the entertainment media. How often is the audience led to sympathize with a bad deed done by a hero who is portraying evil for good: a police officer breaking the law to catch or inflict punishment on the villains or an

adulterous situation where we are led to think it is moral because of some “special circumstance.” Doing the wrong thing for the right reason is still wrong. From my perspective such action is divisive and is part of the “secret combination” whose evil is discussed in the Book of Mormon. Elder Packer noted:

We want our children and their children to know that the choice of life is not between fame and obscurity, nor is the choice between wealth and poverty. The choice is between good and evil, and that is a very different matter indeed. [Boyd K. Packer, “The Choice,” *Ensign*, November 1980, p. 21]

The action I had to take regarding the intentional and continued conduct of this student was difficult. Somewhere there had been a failure to properly nurture this young man’s spirit and guide him to the same successes using gospel principles. Excuses may give us a false sense of righteousness, but they will not change the outcome. Truth, moral principles, and God’s commandments are constant. Our obedience to these must be exacting.

Specific revelation was given to Joseph Smith on November 1, 1831, in Hiram, Ohio:

What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.

For behold, and lo, the Lord is God, and the Spirit beareth record, and the record is true, and the truth abideth forever and ever. [D&C 1:38–39]

Saul was to be anointed by Samuel to be king over all Israel. However, Saul had disobeyed the Lord and had made a sacrifice of the spoils of war even though the Lord had commanded that they be destroyed. Samuel then taught Saul a difficult lesson:

And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.

For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king. [1 Samuel 15:22–23]

Saul replied to Samuel with words that are all too familiar: “I have sinned: for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, and thy words: because I feared the people, and obeyed their voice” (1 Samuel 15:24). What he feared of the people was imposed by the Lord. Individual accountability and responsibility are key factors in our ability to return to the presence of the Father. Quoting from the second article of faith: “We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam’s transgression.”

Today the unwillingness to accept individual responsibility and accountability is endemic throughout our society. There is a lack of constancy and commitment to honor, correct principles, and righteous values. It seems that truth no longer needs to be based on fundamental principles. Instead, much of society confuses “what is” with what it wants it to be. Fiction and fantasy are confused with actuality and reality. More succinctly, the prophet Isaiah said: “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isaiah 5:20).

Nigel Calder writes in *Einstein’s Universe* that people have mistakenly held that Einstein proved that all things were relative. This was far from what Einstein meant. Einstein had considered calling his work the “invariance theory.” Calder writes:

He [Einstein] discovered what was “absolute” and reliable despite the apparent confusions, illusions and contradictions produced by relative motions or

the action of gravity. The chief merit of the name “relativity” is in reminding us that a scientist is unavoidably a participant in the system he is studying. [Nigel Calder, *Einstein’s Universe* (New York: Wings Books, 1982) p. 2; emphasis in original]

Thus, so are we in our relationship with the Lord. The laws, commandments, and ordinances of God are the invariant. Our relation to them is the variant. Any thought of our relativity to his will is because of where we stand spiritually. Obedience and accountability are not related to our perceptions or our needs. We are completely and independently accountable for our actions: “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10).

Glenn Seaborg, an internationally award-winning chemist, wrote, circa 1972, that in an ecological system, as one observes various levels and stages of development, it is not always possible to reconstruct a higher level of development based on what is present in the lower developed system. This is because there are interactions that occur during the transition process that are lost to observation, and hence become unknowns. That is, the result is not always the sum of the observed events. What we think we see or hear may not be what is real.

In my laboratory on campus about a year ago, we completed a series of experiments. In these experiments the participant was shown a videotape of a young female college student saying the sounds /ba/ or /ga/. Sometimes the visual portion would be /ba/ and the auditory portion would be /ga/. What was seen was not heard, and what was heard was not seen. The participant in the beginning did not know when this incongruity would happen. The result was that the presentation would either be reported as hearing /ga/ or neither of the sounds. This persisted even later in the experiment when we told the participant what

the audio portion would be. They could not identify the correct audio portion. This confusion could not be corrected even when the truth was told to the participant. [A videotape demonstration of this phenomenon was used during the presentation of this devotional.]

There are many other examples using our senses that show similar incongruities. Many of these are well known and used to confuse and manipulate us—not just for the purposes of entertainment but to sell products or convince us something is true or occurring when it is only a partial truth. I am convinced that Satan and those who would do us harm—physical, financial, emotional, and spiritual—are masters of partial truths. Partial truths are most effective because they confuse the individual into accepting the part that is the lie or the deception. This is especially true when what we want is not consistent with the laws and commandments of the gospel and when the Spirit speaks against those desires. We are so carefully educated that only what we observe, or can logically account for through extrapolations of our observations, is true. Therefore the Spirit is dulled in us, and we pretend that what is not, is, and what is, is not. In C. S. Lewis’ book *The Screwtape Letters*, a senior devil writing to his nephew, a junior devil, gives this advice:

[People] *find it all but impossible to believe in the unfamiliar while the familiar is before their eyes. . . . But the best of all is to let him read no science but to give him a grand general idea that he knows it all and that everything he happens to have picked up in casual talk and reading is “the results of modern investigation.” Do remember you are there to fuddle him.* [C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Found Paperbacks, 1982) p. 13]

The actual principle is more fully illustrated and taught in the book of Moses. As you recall, God had revealed himself to Moses and instructed Moses. God withdrew from the

presence of Moses, and Moses fell to the earth. After “many hours” Moses’ strength returned, and Moses spoke to himself, saying:

Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed.

But now mine own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural, but my spiritual eyes. [Moses 1:10–11]

If I could have attached a device to your wrist that would let you feel the sounds I spoke of earlier, and if you had been carefully taught, through repetition, what the sounds felt like, there would have been no confusion. The addition of that third sense would have validated the auditory portion of the experiment. So is it with the Spirit. If we let the Spirit validate our thoughts, our actions, and our emotions, they, too, will not become confused. It is our “spiritual eyes” we must trust more than our desires. Our ability to listen to the Spirit and to be obedient to the laws and commandments of God is refined by repetition and adherence to those principles. Once the principle is well seated and learned, then all other decisions become easy; even when they are uncomfortable or appear difficult. Unfortunately we can become so focused on our own desires that we miss the guiding principles. One might say we cannot even recognize ourselves.

Last December I was in Lyon, France, for a small conference. I was out late one evening with a colleague and his wife. Throughout the evening we competed to see who would pay for the subway tickets as we traveled to various places. We were ready to return to our hotels, and, having lost the competition thus far, I was determined to at least win once. Of course my colleague was intent on me not winning. As we were rushing to the Metro station, I quickly spotted a shortcut to my left. As I hurriedly raced down the stairs to the opening, I came face-to-face with a man coming out of the entrance area I was about to enter. My colleague

was fast following suit and was about to cut me off when he, too, encountered a second individual coming out of the same entrance. Both of us, being polite, stepped back to let each of our new encounters pass us by. My encounter also quickly stepped back. As I started forward, so did my encounter. This same scenario was going on with my colleague. I once again stepped back and excused myself, suggesting my encounter proceed. Evidently both myself and my encounter were involved in some type of nonexistent extrasensory communication. He made exactly the same movements at the same moment as I did. All of a sudden I heard laughter coming from my colleague, and I assumed he had succeeded in getting through the entrance. Since I now was very frustrated, and extremely narrowly focused, I decided to move forward and continue. As I did thus, so my encounter moved forward. I began to laugh—after all, we were both trying to be polite. I extended my hand toward his shoulder as a sign of friendship. So did he. As I moved to touch his shoulder, our eyes met for the first time, and I momentarily thought how familiar he looked. Upon touching his shoulder I realized the problem. I had run into myself. My colleague had run into himself. While we were making fools of ourselves in front of a large mirror, his wife quietly entered the Metro in a normal fashion and bought the tickets. A few days later we found ourselves at the same Metro station, and I had a picture taken. After all, it is important to document our stupidity for our posterity.

Shortly after the resurrection of Christ, two of his disciples were walking to Emmaus and talking of the events that had just transpired. As you recall, the resurrected Christ appeared quietly and began walking with them (see Luke 24:15). Christ inquired as to what their conversation was about and why they were so sad. They responded by saying how astonished and somewhat confused they were about the events of the past few days—especially when

Christ's body was not found in the sepulchre. Christ rebuked them and then taught them:

And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further.

But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. And he went in to tarry with them.

And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them.

And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight.

And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures? [Luke 24:27–32]

As Moses recounts, "Mine own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural, but my spiritual eyes" (Moses 1:11).

Oftentimes we forget that we cannot have everything, that decisions narrow our focus and become a compass toward our future. We not only include certain activities, certain thoughts, or certain actions when we make decisions, but we also exclude many options. Indeed, we set a course of action whose outcome we have tried to predict and whose outcome will have certain results. It is never perfect or exact. It is always an approximation to the desired outcome, with some unknown consequence.

In Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*, the chaplain enters after just witnessing the burning of Joan of Arc. He realizes he was manipulated and used, thus causing this good person's death at the stake. The chaplain enters from the courtyard, where her execution has just occurred:

I let them do it. If I had known, I would have torn her from their hands. You don't know: you haven't

*seen: it is so easy to talk when you don't know. You madden yourself with words: you [condemn] yourself because it feels grand. . . . But when it is brought home to you; when you see the thing you have done; when it is blinding your eyes, stifling your nostrils, tearing your heart. . . . Take away this sight from me! . . . Deliver me from this fire that is consuming me. [George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan*, scene VI]*

In 1988 I concluded more than 10 years of service to the Hill Cumorah Pageant as a technical director responsible for lighting. It was an experience that is hard to relate, but it had a profound effect on my life and on my family. My wife made great sacrifices as I would leave for six to seven weeks each summer and establish residence in Palmyra, New York. Frequently I would take one of our five children. During that time we would talk of the early days of the Church, visit the Sacred Grove, and speak of the Lord. Each year we would hear the story of the Book of Mormon recounted 30 to 40 times. My children became knowledgeable and enjoyed telling the stories and scenes portrayed in the pageant. At home we would discuss current events and how they related to principles and examples found within the Book of Mormon. Frequently in their early years they would act out their favorite scenes. Both my wife and I knew that such service was no sacrifice.

Let me tell you about an incident that happened a few years prior to my release. One of the members in Rochester, New York, was a chemist working with Eastman Kodak. He had taken many pictures of the pageant over the years, and one of the professional photographers at Kodak had seen some of his work. The photographer was most impressed and offered to photograph the pageant using some extremely large equipment. Arrangements were made, and the pictures were to be completed following one of the regular performances. As occasionally would happen, the

local farmers were blessed with a light drizzle—actually it was more of a mist. It had been one of those days that dispel the rumor that it never rains during the pageant—a rumor that is a little wet.

Upon our arrival the next year, the picture, which spanned a wall about 6–8 feet high and 15–18 feet long, was in a room within the visitors' center. We were ushered in for the unveiling of the print. Needless to say, it was overwhelming. The photographer had captured all of the spirit and beauty of the final yearning scene. I was most excited because my oldest daughter had been with me that year and was onstage just right of the center of the picture. As I was looking at this impressive picture, I suddenly became very quiet and somewhat withdrawn. There were approximately 600 cast members in the pageant that year. I noticed a problem with the third or fourth cast member from the end in the lower right side of the picture. One cast member wanted to be in the picture, wanted to be warm, dry, and comfortable, and did not want to stay in his wet costume. It was evident from the picture that he had changed into some jeans and a long-sleeve shirt and had slipped a light brown trash bag, in which he had torn holes for his head and arms, over his jeans. He also wanted to be seen in the picture and placed himself directly in front of a light. He wanted it all. Obedience and adherence to instructions were not as important as his emotional needs. Kodak had intended to use this picture in a publication as well as in an extremely large display. The picture was now useless—costly in both time and money. Eastman Kodak was gracious enough to repeat the process the following year.

The Lord does not require us to understand, nor perhaps to initially agree: The Lord requires us to obey. "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams"

(1 Samuel 15:22). As Christ has said: "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

Karl Popper, an acclaimed philosopher, once concluded that man knows a great deal and that man's ignorance is "sobering and boundless" (David Miller, *Popper Selections* [New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985], epigraph). There is much I do not know. There is much I am ignorant in my knowledge about. However, I do know that God does live; that Jesus Christ is the Savior of mankind, the Son of God; that through him we may become like him; and that our sins "shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18).

I know and bear witness that Gordon B. Hinckley is a prophet of God and stands as the president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I solemnize that he is not only president, prophet, seer, and revelator, but he holds all the keys and rights of the priesthood. I testify that Thomas Monson and James Faust are prophets, seers, and revelators, as well as are the members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. I testify that their interest is to not only show us the way to return to our Father in Heaven, but also to guide us through the tumultuous elements of our mortal existence. I know that we can never fail if we follow exactly and precisely the counsel of those who have been chosen by God, through revelation, as our leaders. As the Lord has said, "Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same" (D&C 1:38).

I testify these things are true. I pray the Lord's richest blessings on all. I pray for peace in your hearts and your souls. I pray that you may have the strength and courage to always do the right thing, to make the right choices, and to be obedient to the laws and commandments of God. I pray for your safety and happiness now and forever, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

Artist: Keith Green. Song: To Obey Is Better Than Sacrifice. Album: The Ministry Years, vol. 1. Translations: Portuguese.Â But your flesh is something I just can't feed. To obey is better than sacrifice. I want more than sunday and wednesday nights. Cause if you can't come to me every day. Then don't bother coming at all. La,la,la etc. To obey is better than sacrifice. I want hearts of fire. Not your prayers of ice. Well you speak of grace and my love so sweet How you thrive on milk, but reject my meat And I can't help weeping of how it will be If you keep on ignoring my words Well you pray to prosper and succeed But your flesh is something I just can't feed. To obey is better than sacrifice I want more than sunday and wednesday nights Cause if you can't come to me every day Then don't bother coming at all La, la, la etc. To obey is better than sacrifice I want hearts of fire Not your prayers of ice And I'm coming quickly To give back to you According to what you have done Accordi Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams (1 Samuel 15:22 KJV, emphasis mine). God wanted obedience, not sacrifice. This wasn't Saul's first act of disobedience; it had become a pattern. Disobedience has consequences, and in Saul's case it cost him his place as king. God told Samuel to anoint David as Saul's replacement. In King Saul we have an example of the negative consequences of disobedience, but in King David we have an example of a man after God's own heart. David was not perfect, but when he failed, he was quick to repent and return to God. Like Dav