

Knowing, Doing, and Being

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I am grateful to be joined by my wife, Jeannie, and a number of our children and grandchildren today. In two months Jeannie and I will celebrate our 40th wedding anniversary. She has been a wonderful companion. She and my family are the source of my greatest joys. They are also the source of some of my greatest humor.

A few years ago, in a joint family home evening, my daughter Julie gave a lesson, and then I started making a few concluding comments, as grandpas often do. My little grandson, Ethan, then aged three, had had enough, and he shouted out, "Just say amen, Grandpa!" Even though he was quite young, he had learned that there is a direct correlation between when speakers say amen and when they stop talking. Ethan is here with us this morning, and I hope he will show a little restraint with his comments as I speak.

During the years I have taught at BYU, I have enjoyed hearing from a wide range of speakers on a great variety of topics. One story shared by Elder Oaks when he was president of BYU has stuck with me. Given from this very pulpit, the story went something like this:

Many years ago the federal government placed county agents throughout the country to help farmers learn to be more productive.

One county agent in the South went to visit an old farmer in his area, but he found that convincing the farmer to change proved rather difficult.

He asked the farmer, "Wouldn't you like to know how to get your cows to give more milk?"

"Nope," the farmer replied.

"Well, wouldn't you like your pigs to have larger litters of baby pigs?"

Again the farmer answered, "Nope."

"Well, wouldn't you like to learn how to get more corn per acre?"

The same answer was given as before: "Nope."

Exasperated, the county agent asked, "Well, why not?"

The farmer replied simply, "I already knows more than I does."

In other words, his knowledge was greater than his application of that knowledge, so why make matters worse by obtaining even more knowledge!

This story highlights two great challenges of mortality: first, the need to constantly increase

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our knowledge and, second, the need to continually improve our behavior to keep up with that greater knowledge. But there's also a third challenge the county agent might have uncovered if he had asked a second "why" question: "Why don't you do as much as you know?" This question gets closer to the core of the problem—the farmer's level of love for his work, or what he was in his heart. In addition to increasing what we know and improving how we apply that knowledge, we must refine who we are deep down in our heart.

In a general conference address a few years ago, Elder Dallin H. Oaks stated, "In contrast to the institutions of the world, which teach us to *know* something, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to *become* something" ("The Challenge to Become," *Ensign*, November 2000, 32; emphasis in original).

As we move along the path of life, each of us, as members of the Church, must address these three areas of knowing, doing, and being.

Increasing Our Knowing

First, we must increase our level of knowledge, or what we know. In our search for truth, however, we have to be selective, because we have an overwhelming amount of information available to us. It seems to me that information can be classified into four categories.

The first consists of that which is harmful and destructive. Much of today's media falls into this category. Pornography is especially dangerous, for it will drive away the Spirit and destroy us.

The second category includes information that isn't necessarily destructive but is not of much use. Pursuing it is largely a waste of time.

The third category includes information that is good and useful and offers much practical benefit. Most of our university learning falls into this category.

The fourth category includes vital information—specifically gospel knowledge. The truthfulness and value of the information

in this fourth category will be confirmed to us by the Holy Spirit.

How important it is for us to shun the harmful, avoid wasting time on the useless, and, instead, focus on the useful and vital—that which gives eternal perspective, helps develop wisdom, and teaches us the mind and nature of God. The 13th article of faith says that we, as Latter-day Saints, seek after things that are "virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy" (Articles of Faith 1:13). That's a good standard for us to keep in mind as we choose what to read, what to listen to, and what to view.

Where do we find the vital information for our lives? Three major sources, I believe, are the temple, Church magazines, and the scriptures. In the temple we come into the Lord's house, dedicated as "a house of learning" (D&C 109:8), where we are taught eternal truths through verbal, visual, and symbolic instruction and where we may seek inspiration for specific personal concerns. President Gordon B. Hinckley has said:

*Every temple, large or small, has its beautiful celestial room. . . . It is our privilege, unique and exclusive, while dressed in white, to sit at the conclusion of our ordinance work in the beautiful celestial room and ponder, meditate, and silently pray. ["Closing Remarks," *Ensign*, November 2004, 105]*

We all need to make the temple an important and frequent part of our learning.

We also need the *Ensign* and its messages of wisdom and inspiration to come into our homes and into our lives each month. Just as the early Saints looked to their prophet Brigham Young to guide them along a literal path from the Midwest to the Rocky Mountains, so must we look to our prophets to guide us along a spiritual path. I hope each student apartment receives the *Ensign* each month and is blessed by its influence.

In addition to learning from the temple and from the *Ensign*, we need daily scripture study. Just as helium slowly escapes from an inflated balloon, allowing it to shrink and fall after a few days, so do we slowly lose the power and memory of the scriptures without daily reading. President Gordon B. Hinckley has said:

*I hope that for you [studying the scriptures] will become something far more enjoyable than a duty; that, rather, it will become a love affair with the word of God. I promise you that as you read, your minds will be enlightened and your spirits will be lifted. ["The Light Within You," *Ensign*, May 1995, 99]*

In August 2005 President Gordon B. Hinckley asked all of us to reread the Book of Mormon by the end of that year. He promised us “an added measure of the Spirit of the Lord, a strengthened resolution to walk in obedience to His commandments, and a stronger testimony of the living reality of the Son of God” (“A Testimony Vibrant and True,” *Ensign*, August 2005, 6). Faithful Saints from all over the world responded to the call.

Regarding this challenge, a member of my BYU stake shared the following special experience with me. To the best of my recollection, he said:

I was flying back from a trip to the Far East. It was the middle of the night, and most of the passengers were asleep. I, however, had my reading light on and was reading the Book of Mormon so I could finish by the end of the year as the prophet had asked.

Suddenly I was interrupted by a flight attendant who was walking down the aisle. She whispered, “Where are you?”

I responded, “I’m in Helaman.”

She replied, “I’m in Ether.” Then she said, “Turn around and look.” I turned and looked toward the back of the plane and saw several other reading lights on. She whispered, “All reading the Book of Mormon.”

Although our lives are filled with countless demands and distractions, I think we all learned from our prophet that we can find the time to study the scriptures if we are determined enough, each in our own way and place and time. He has told us the *what*; individually we work out the *how*.

In addition to giving spiritual strength, the scriptures contain counsel to help address life’s practical challenges. Some years ago I served as a branch president at the Missionary Training Center. I often told the missionaries that the scriptures could help them solve all their missionary challenges.

One Sunday, in priesthood meeting, we listed on the chalkboard several typical missionary challenges. Then I assigned small groups of elders to look up scriptures to address each of the challenges. After a few minutes I asked them to report their findings. One group had tackled the problem of dealing with girlfriends back home. The verse they found to solve the problem came from John 2:4: “Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come.”

Improving Our Doing

Building on the first area—increasing our knowing—we move on to the second area: improving our doing. Although increased knowledge is vital, it is not enough. The Apostle James stated that we must “be . . . doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). Just as reading and pondering the words of God are accompanied by the Spirit, so will the doing aspect of the gospel be accompanied by the Spirit. The Savior said, “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17).

The Lord expects each step upward in knowledge to be followed by a step upward in performance. The Apostle James added, “To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (James 4:17). In other words,

sin is the difference between our knowing and our doing. The greater the gap between the two, the greater the sin, and, as section 82 of the Doctrine and Covenants instructs, “For of him unto whom much is given much is required; and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation” (D&C 82:3).

Elder Neal A. Maxwell highlighted the tight linkage between knowing and doing as follows:

So it is that discipleship requires all of us to translate doctrines, covenants, ordinances, and teachings into improved personal behavior. Otherwise we may be doctrinally rich but end up developmentally poor. [“Becoming a Disciple,” Ensign, June 1996, 14]

Why does our doing so often lag behind our knowing, whether with home teaching, family home evening, or a wide range of other areas? I suppose that busy schedules, distractions, wrong priorities, lack of commitment, and just poor time management contribute to the problem. In statements regarding attendance at the temple, President Heber J. Grant addressed the typical excuses we make:

We can generally do that which we wish to do. A young man can find an immense amount of time to spend with his sweetheart. . . . We can arrange our affairs to get exercise in the shape of golf and otherwise. We can arrange our affairs to have amusements. And if we make up our minds to do so we can arrange our affairs to do temple work, judging from my own experience. [GS, 33–34; see CR, April 1928, 8–9]

I do not know of any one that is any busier than I am, and if I can do it they can, if they will only get the spirit in their hearts and souls of wanting to do it. [Power from on High: A Lesson Book for Fourth Year Junior Genealogical Classes (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1937), 26]

There is the key: get the spirit in our hearts so we want to do it.

Improvement in the doing arena takes great dedication. New habits can be hard to establish, and old habits can be hard to break. As my son Steve concluded his mission in England, my wife and a daughter and I joined him to travel and to visit some of the people he had baptized or helped to activate. One faithful sister talked of her growth in the Church since her baptism. She spoke of the dedicated effort required to stay on the path and then said, “It is so easy to backslide.”

It is indeed easy to backslide, but we can avoid it or overcome it with enough determination. One of the people I baptized on my mission in Canada showed incredible determination to break a cigarette habit. He and his family lived on a small farm northwest of Calgary, Alberta, and a few months after they were baptized, he was out in the barn moving some bales of hay. Under one of the bales he discovered a partially smoked cigarette. Without thinking he picked it up and ran toward the house to get a match so he could smoke it. But halfway there he stopped, looked at the cigarette, and asked himself, “Am I going to be in charge of my life or is this cigarette going to rule over me?” After a crucial moment of intense internal battle, he dropped the cigarette to the ground and walked slowly back to the barn.

For he will give unto the faithful line upon line, precept upon precept; and I will try you and prove you herewith. . . .

. . . I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant, even unto death. [D&C 98:12, 14]

Let me share two additional doing examples that highlight the importance of establishing and maintaining good spiritual habits. First, a member of my BYU stake recently told me that at one time in her life she had been mistreated

at Church, so she stayed away for a few weeks. Even after just a few weeks of absence this wonderful returned missionary found it difficult to come back. “Looking back on it now,” she said, “I realize how important it is to stick with good spiritual habits.”

The second example comes from my own family. Our daughter Amy married into a family that has had daily scripture study for more than 20 years without a single miss. And Amy and her family have carried on that pattern for the seven years they have been married. Even when she is in the hospital with a new baby, their daily scripture study is carried on by telephone. How gratifying it is for Jeannie and me as parents to visit the homes of our other children as well and see a similar pattern of faithfulness—including our family’s habit of weekly family home evenings, which now spans nearly 40 years.

Just as our gaining of knowledge should expand from basic principles to deeper doctrine, so should our doing go beyond minimal compliance with specific “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” commandments. The Lord said:

It is not meet that I should command in all things. . . .

. . . Men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;

For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. [D&C 58:26–28]

Just as there are harmful and useless materials that can occupy our reading and learning, so are there harmful and useless activities that can occupy our time. We should avoid filling our days with these activities and instead spend our time doing that which is useful and essential. As someone once stated, that which matters most must never be at the mercy of that which matters least. Giving service—such as that which we give in the Church, in our

communities, and especially in our families—is central to this useful and essential work. By losing ourselves in doing good for others, we come to understand what the Lord meant when He said: “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 10:39).

Purifying Our Being

Moving from increasing our knowing and improving our doing, we come to the third and most important part of our progress: purifying our being, or refining who and what we are deep down in our hearts.

Elder Henry B. Eyring clarified that although doing is important, it is not our ultimate goal. In our last general conference he said, “The things we do are the means, not the end we seek. What we *do* allows the Atonement of Jesus Christ to change us into what we must *be*” (“As a Child,” *Ensign*, May 2006, 16; emphasis added). Elder David A. Bednar added, “People of integrity and honesty not only practice what they preach, they are what they preach” (“Be Honest,” *New Era*, October 2005, 7).

Elder Dallin H. Oaks has taught:

The Final Judgment is not just an evaluation of a sum total of good and evil acts—what we have done. It is an acknowledgment of the final effect of our acts and thoughts—what we have become. It is not enough for anyone just to go through the motions. The commandments, ordinances, and covenants of the gospel are not a list of deposits required to be made in some heavenly account. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a plan that shows us how to become what our Heavenly Father desires us to become. [“The Challenge to Become,” 32; emphasis in original]

And what is it that we must become? The Savior answered very simply: “Even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27). He is the mark we must always look to. He is our supreme example.

He was chosen as our Savior not just because of His perfect obedience but because of His perfect love—love that encompasses perfect knowledge and that motivates perfect obedience.

The Savior also used the example of a child to teach us what we must become. Matthew recorded:

And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,

And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. [Matthew 18:2–3]

Numerous verses of scripture give additional detail as to the type of people we must become. For example:

“We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous” (Articles of Faith 1:13).

“Be humble, and be submissive and gentle; easy to be entreated; full of patience and long-suffering; being temperate in all things” (Alma 7:23).

“Becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things [from] the Lord” (Mosiah 3:19).

“Faith, hope, charity and love, . . . virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, brotherly kindness, godliness, charity, humility, diligence” (D&C 4:5–6).

And, finally: “Long-suffering, . . . gentleness and meekness, . . . love . . . ; [and] kindness” (D&C 121:41–42).

That, to me, is an exciting list. Imagine yourself when all those Christlike attributes are yours! Obviously, we are in for a lifetime of effort and then some. The Prophet Joseph Smith stated:

When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you

arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave. [HC 6:306–7]

The family proclamation also highlighted the long-term process of becoming like Christ, saying that we are here in mortality to “obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection” (“The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102; emphasis added).

Some of us become too self-critical in the process. We want patience, and we want it now! Sooner or later we have to learn that becoming patient includes learning patience with ourselves as well as with others. Things take time. Those who become perfectionistic and overzealous often find that the gospel isn’t much fun anymore. It is more stressful than satisfying. We can fall off both sides of the path, and we must strive to stay in the middle where we are making *reasonable* progress, given our life’s circumstances. The Lord told the Prophet Joseph Smith, “Do not run faster or labor more than you have strength and means” (D&C 10:4). That is good counsel. We all need to learn to do our very best and then to be at peace.

Two specific temple recommend interview questions set a nice standard for us. They don’t ask if we are perfect but rather if we are “striving” to keep the commandments and if we consider ourselves to be “worthy.” Without becoming anxious and obsessive overachievers, we can *strive* to keep the commandments and we can be *worthy*. Elder Neal A. Maxwell reminded us, “All of us are in the process of becoming—including prophets and General Authorities” (Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979], 105).

Because of differences in opportunity, talent, and circumstance, how we become Christlike varies somewhat from person to person. But common elements in our spiritual progress include gospel study, service and activity in the Church, and obedience to the commandments. But, above all, it is the cleansing effect of the Atonement and the Spirit that purify and change our hearts. As King Benjamin's people learned, it was "the Spirit of the Lord [that] wrought a mighty change in [them], that [they had] no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2).

The many trials and challenges of life also help us become more Christlike. For some people, life's trials seem to be relatively small. But even many little trials over a period of years can help us learn patience, meekness, and love if we will be humble and teachable students. In our last general conference, President Gordon B. Hinckley, at age 96, said, "When a man grows old he develops a softer touch, a kinder manner" ("The Need for Greater Kindness," *Ensign*, May 2006, 58). Someone once told me, "It's not your fault if you're not beautiful by age 18, but it is your fault if you're not beautiful by age 80."

One of the special older and beautiful people in my life was my mother. After my father died, at almost 99 years of age, my mother, also in her nineties, lived with my family from time to time. Through her sweet example she taught us always to look on the bright side of life and to see the good in others. One day Jeannie was telling her of one of our sons whose bedroom was a disaster, with clothes, schoolbooks, and other "stuff" strewn about on the bed and floor. My mother listened patiently and then said lovingly, "Well, just tell him he has a clean ceiling." This grandmother with her pure and loving heart was able to overlook the mess on the floor and look upward to the ceiling to find something to compliment.

For some people the trials of life can be much more challenging. A month ago my son

Steve and his wife, Amy, were saddened to learn that their little five-month-old daughter, their first child, has a 17th-chromosome disorder that presents to her and to her parents a very uncertain future. Since then, the Primary Children's Medical Center in Salt Lake City has become their home as the medical staff monitors little Brooklyn's rare problems. Remembering that Robby Hammond, my teaching assistant from two years ago, has a daughter with an 18th-chromosome problem, I wrote to Robby and told him of Steve and Amy's situation. In his e-mail reply regarding my granddaughter, this young father revealed the tenderness of his heart as he talked of his own daughter Emily, now two years old:

It's always a difficult time when you learn something like this, but believe me when I tell you that there is so much joy that comes from situations like these. Camille and I have never been through anything as joyful, or as painful at times, as with Emily. But it's the painful times that make the joyful times so indescribable. For example, when Emily was born, we were told a fairly "doom and gloom" story about what Emily would be like as she grew up. If those doctors could only see Emily now . . .

Her most recent trick is rolling onto her stomach and getting up on her hands and knees and rocking back and forth. Because she is blind, she hasn't quite figured out that crawling can get her where she wants to go. I mention this because of how incredible I feel when I see her learn to do something as simple as get on her hands and knees and rock back and forth. It has almost brought me to tears of joy sometimes just watching her progress.

Please let your son know that while there are certainly difficulties, the joys are unimaginable. Emily brings a very strong spiritual presence to my life.
[Robby Hammond, e-mail to author, June 2006]

Trials were certainly no stranger to the Prophet Joseph Smith. While suffering in Liberty Jail, he was told by the Lord, "All these things shall give thee experience, and shall be

for thy good” (D&C 122:7). At the end of his life, just before riding off to Carthage, where he would meet his death, Sister Mary Ellen Kimball overheard him say to her neighbor, “If I never see you again, or if I *never come back*, remember that I love you.” Sister Kimball wrote that the Prophet’s “enemies had ripened in wickedness and he in goodness.” (In Mark L. McConkie, *Remembering Joseph: Personal Recollections of Those Who Knew the Prophet Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003], 75, 76; emphasis in original.)

That is also our challenge—to ripen in goodness even in the midst of a world ripening in wickedness, to develop a Christlike heart filled with love for God and all mankind. Without a heart filled with love for what we do and for those whom we serve, none of us will ever fully achieve what we could or should.

Conclusion

I pray that the Lord will bless us throughout our lives as we strive to progress in all three

areas of knowing, doing, and being. I pray that we will be diligent and do our very best, but I also pray that we will be patient as we improve line upon line, learning upon learning, repentance upon repentance, onward and upward, with the Lord trying us and proving us as we go.

At times we will learn first and be tried later; at other times the Lord will try us first and then teach us from the trials. But in spite of the sequence, I pray that we will move forward with faith in and love for the Lord—even while not knowing beforehand what lies ahead. Later in life we’ll be able to look back on the *what* of our lives and understand the *why*. If we have been true and faithful, these backward glances will reveal to us a clear path of progress toward perfection guided by an all-wise, patient, and loving Heavenly Father. I testify that He lives, that His Son Jesus Christ is our Savior and Redeemer, and that They know and love each one of us beyond our present capacity to comprehend. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.