

# *Living Life by Axioms*

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**E**lder Scott, President Samuelson, faculty, staff, parents, and graduates, it is a privilege and honor to be with you, as assigned by the First Presidency and the board of trustees. It is a joy to be here today.

I am grateful for the honorary doctoral degree bestowed upon me. What a wonderful privilege it is to be at a university that recognizes and honors Christian service!

Today many of you are to be honored for graduating. That is why we have come together: to honor you and this institution. This is a day to rejoice, a day to express gratitude to your parents, family members, teachers, and especially your Father in Heaven. It is a day to acknowledge the divinely inspired purpose of BYU and to thank members of the Church who support and sustain this university by faithful payment of their tithes. Most of all, it is a day to commend you.

You have kept the commandment to

*be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God . . . ;*

*Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the*

*judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms. [D&C 88:78–79]*

Recent events in these countries and kingdoms throughout the world tell us that we are living in the last days. The increasing “perplexities of the nations” recall the words of our Savior, Jesus Christ: “Ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars. . . . For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (Matthew 24:6–7).

It is a challenging but exciting time. The gospel is rolling forth as a stone cut out of a mountain without hands. It is filling the earth. And now it is your privilege to help move this great work forward.

Not very long ago you entered this university to learn. By and large you have been successful in the world of school. But today you walk out the doors of this Marriott Center into another world. The question is: How can you be *in* the world but not *of* the world?

As you go forth to serve, you will find that your greatest success and influence won’t come

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solely from the knowledge you have gained. It will come from what you do with that knowledge—the wise use of agency to make sound decisions.

In the next 10 years you will make some of the most important decisions of your life. Those decisions will be regarding

- temple worthiness and covenants;
- choosing an eternal companion and, for those who have already made that choice, making the companionship work;
- beginning your family;
- beginning a life of service and callings in the Church;
- choosing where you will live;
- choosing who your employer will be;
- choosing where you will work; and
- choosing how you will conduct yourself.

Indeed, a decade of decision lies ahead. Of course there are some decisions that must wait until circumstances change and your understanding develops, but many of your most important decisions can and should be made now.

For example, you can decide the principles or axioms that will influence your decision making in the future. With this in mind, and with your permission, President Samuelson, I'd like to add a new degree to those who are graduating from BYU today: the LLBA or "living life by axioms" degree.

Here are 10 of these axioms, distilled from my own experience in living the gospel and living life. I hope they will be helpful to you in determining the principles that may guide your life.

#### **Axiom 1**

*It is not the obstacle that counts but how you overcome it.*

Consider, for a moment, that you are the engineer of a train. As your locomotive races down the tracks, you look out the window. In

the distance you see a great pile of debris blocking your way. What do you do?

- You can radio ahead for help.
- You can stop the train and take care of the problem yourself.
- You can pour coal into the burner and let the engine plow through the trouble.

Now it's axiomatic that we will all encounter obstacles in our lives. Temporal obstacles make eternal development possible. So you must decide how to meet those obstacles. Like the engineer, you can call for help. Through prayer, fasting, and diligent study you can obtain the assistance of your Heavenly Father and the Holy Ghost. The Lord will comfort us, strengthen us, and enlighten us by His Holy Spirit. Often He will give us inspired counsel through parents and priesthood leaders.

Sometimes He will smooth our path by removing the obstacle. Sometimes, like a switchman, He will help us get on a different track. But from time to time the only way to clear debris from the track is to stop the train and take care of the problem. This is always true when the obstacles are of our own making, such as when we violate the Lord's commandments. Repentance is the only way to clear the debris of sin and move forward in our lives. "By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them" (D&C 58:43).

Finally, there are times when Heavenly Father directs us to pour on the spiritual coal. With faith and hope we must plow ahead—or, to use the more scriptural phrase, "press forward":

*Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life.*  
[2 Nephi 31:20]

**Axiom 2**

*Pursue your goals with all your heart, might, mind, and strength. You are doomed to failure if you pursue them in a vacillating manner.*

So often we are tentative and don't move forward with conviction. We feel along our way as if we were afraid in the dark. It is so much better to turn on the light of faith and move ahead with energy and commitment. If our course is wrong, we will quickly recognize it and make the necessary adjustments. But if we pursue a course tentatively and indecisively, it is difficult to know whether it is right or wrong in time to correct it and make a difference. The Lord said, "I would thou wert cold or hot" (Revelation 3:15). I hope we choose being active and being hot. We should decide now to make our decisions prayerfully and then move forward with faith, energy, and determination. As one novelist said, "If you're going to have steam in the kettle, you've got to have a fire in the stove" (Louis L'Amour).

**Axiom 3**

*From a tiny spark can come a great conflagration.*

In the course of moving forward, it is normal to generate a few sparks. Misunderstandings, differences of opinion, and diverse personalities and styles can produce friction. Remember, if we are not careful, little things can easily become big things. Decide now to extinguish the sparks of conflict by thinking well of others and being kind to others. As the Lord taught, "Agree with thine adversary quickly while thou art in the way with him" (3 Nephi 12:25).

Don't criticize. Don't murmur. What you say about others may—and usually does—get back to them. See the good in people and develop that goodness through your own unwavering friendship, acceptance, loyalty, trust, and love.

**Axiom 4**

*Our greatest strengths can become our greatest weaknesses.*

At this university you have prepared well to successfully complete your assignments. You have studied, memorized, and conceptualized to please your professors, pass your exams, and complete your courses. You have become very good at schoolwork. Your ability has been a great strength to you, but if you are not careful it can also become a great weakness. Use the gifts that have been given to you and do not rely solely on the abilities that you have developed at the university. When not properly balanced, the skills you have gained can be very self-serving, and, in the world outside the university, they can become very limiting.

For instance, you may know how to write a good paper, but if you cannot get along with other people, you may fail. You must now apply the knowledge you have gained to strengthen the Church, your family, your work, the community, and your friendships. Our greatest strengths can become weaknesses to us whenever we forget that our gifts, talents, and intellect are given to us by God and whenever we rely on the natural man and forget that God is the giver of all the gifts of life.

If we would keep our strengths from turning to weaknesses, we must "confess . . . his hand in all things, and obey . . . his commandments" (D&C 59:21).

**Axiom 5**

*Failure is one of the greatest teachers we have, if we have the faith to learn from it.*

The Savior said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation" (John 16:33). But because He has "overcome the world," we can "be of good cheer"—no failure is permanent (John 16:33). Therefore we should embrace the opportunity to learn from our mistakes, analyze where we could have done better, and make plans to improve. In doing so we will discover that setbacks and disappointments are, as Joseph Smith was told, "but for a small moment" and "shall be for [our] good" (D&C 122:4, 7; see also D&C 121:7).

With faith we can take seriously the Lord's counsel to "search diligently, pray always, and be believing, and all things shall work together for [our] good" (D&C 90:24).

#### **Axiom 6**

*It is not how you start the race or where you are during the race—it is how you cross the finish line that is going to matter.*

John Stephen Akhwari, a marathon runner from Tanzania, competed in the 1968 Summer Olympics. As he was suffering along the way from fatigue, leg cramps, dehydration, and disorientation, "a voice called from within to go on, and so he went on" (*The Last African Runner*, Olympiad Series, written, directed, and produced by Bud Greenspan, Cappy Productions, 1976, videocassette). Exhausted and staggering, John Stephen Akhwari was the last man to enter the stadium, more than an hour after the winner of the marathon had completed the race. When asked why he would complete a race he could never win, Akhwari replied, "My country did not send me 5,000 miles to *start* the race; my country sent me to *finish* the race."

We are not brought to earth just to be born into mortality. We came with a mission and a purpose—and that is to endure to the end.

Remember the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. All of them served the Master, and all received an equal wage. It did not matter that some arrived after others—only that each one finally came and endured.

Don't let missteps of your youth discourage or overcome you. The Lord's judgments are not spiritual GPAs with past sins and mistakes averaged into a final grade. He has promised that "he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more" (D&C 58:42).

So if you are not where you want to be, decide today to get there. Our lifetime degrees will be graded on how well we live the com-

mandments and how well we have fulfilled our saving ordinances—baptism, receiving the Holy Ghost, washings, anointings, endowments, and a sacred sealing in the temple to an eternal companion.

You can cross the finish line. "Go forward and not backward. Courage, . . . and on, on to the victory!" (D&C 128:22).

#### **Axiom 7**

Borrowed from Brigham Young: "*If you wish to get rich, save what you get. A fool can earn money; but it takes a wise man to save and dispose of it to his own advantage*" (JD 11:301).

It is to our advantage to cultivate genuine happiness in our lives. Joseph Smith taught that this "happiness is the object and design of our existence" (HC 5:134). Unfortunately we live in an age of greed—one in which many suffer from an insatiable, enslaving appetite for temporal things.

Remember, *temporal* means "temporary." And temporary things we cannot bring with us for eternal happiness. So look forward. Take the eternal perspective. Be patient. Pay your tithes and offerings and save your money. Freely give of your offerings. Do not try to have now what it took your parents years of patient saving to acquire. Happy is the individual who can live within his means today and enjoy it.

#### **Axiom 8**

*You cannot learn the Lord's will without exercising your agency and becoming accountable for your decisions.*

Too often we think that with little or no effort on our part, the Holy Ghost will give us answers to our questions. Like Oliver Cowdery, we take "no thought save it [be] to ask" (D&C 9:7). And, regrettably, sometimes we don't even pray. But this is not the way of the Lord. He has commanded us to "study it out in [our] mind[s]; [and] *then* . . . ask [Him] if it be right" (D&C 9:8, emphasis added).

For example, when choosing an eternal companion, we do not present a list of names to the Lord and ask Him to decide. Instead, we exercise our agency by participating in dating experiences. We get to know another person's inner attitudes and outward behavior. Then we make a decision and take it to the Lord. In this way we become accountable for our decisions and responsible to prayerfully resolve any challenges that may arise.

#### **Axiom 9**

A new interpretation of the old French proverb: *The more things change, the more they stay the same.*

In 1975 I stood at this podium and held up my left hand. "We are here," I said, with my left hand representing the Church. I then held up my right hand. "And the world is here and is moving farther and farther away." At that time I imagined the world moving its way outside the building, past Brigham City and Logan and into Idaho. "But," referring to my stationary left hand, "the Church is still here," I said. That was 28 years ago.

Today the world is a great deal farther away than that. From my perspective, I'd put it in Australia—maybe farther. But my left hand is in the same stationary position. The Church is still here and will remain here.

As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, you should expect to be different from your peers in the world. You should expect the distance to increase. Many want to have the Church just stay a little behind where the world is and keep moving with it. That is not the way the Lord would have it. As we come to the last days, we need to stand firm and say, "Don't be dismayed."

Those with eyes to see will recognize you as the light on the hill. They will seek you out because you know where to find the light in the darkness of these latter days—which leads me to the final axiom for today.

#### **Axiom 10**

*The temple of God is the greatest university.*

The knowledge of the truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is the most valuable knowledge you will ever possess, and the endowment is the eternal curriculum. It teaches us where we came from and why we are here on earth. In the Lord's holy house we are given the promise of achieving life eternal in the celestial kingdom if we obey the commandments and covenants. Go to the temple.

With these 10 axioms in mind, I want to bear a personal testimony to you and give you a promise.

In striving to be a successful son or daughter of God, you never have to compromise the things of the kingdom. Wherever your divinely appointed mission takes you, wherever your life is concerned, you will never be penalized for living the gospel. However, if for your own temporal gains you compromise God's eternal principles, you will lose the eternal blessings that are rightfully yours.

As a New York boy, I grew up as one of only two or three members of the Church in a high school of several thousand. At a recent 50-year reunion, my former classmates remembered and expressed appreciation for how I had lived according to the values and beliefs of the Church. I realized then that one infraction of the Word of Wisdom or transgression of moral values would have meant I could never have said, "This is what I believe," and be trusted by my friends.

We can only share the gospel to the extent we live it.

During my life at college, in the military as an adjutant and fighter pilot, in graduate school, or in my professional career—in sales and marketing, as president of a division, or as group vice president at the corporate headquarters—I was never required to compromise my values or beliefs.

Was it easy? I don't know. I wasn't looking for easy.

Was it hard? I wasn't looking for hard either. That is just the way it was and the way you will find it in your life, too.

Were there men and women who challenged me about my beliefs at times? Certainly.

When I held to my beliefs, did they respect and honor the commitment I had made to live the gospel? In every instance.

If you will remember who you are and act accordingly; if you will give your full effort to every calling, task, and assignment; if you will be true to the Savior's name and worthy of His eternal blessings, being able to have a temple recommend and be worthy to take the sacrament each week—then you will always have the light of the Holy Ghost to be with you, to lead you, to guide you, and to buoy you up. You will never want for what to say or how to act. It will be given to you.

How you live, what you represent, how you treat your associates, and how you honor and revere your companion and your family will spread the influence of our Savior Jesus

Christ to your friends and neighbors, for there is no greater Christian service than to become like Him, heed the counsel of His Spirit, and do His will.

As the years go by, you will discover many axioms that reflect your own experience of living the gospel. Learn them, live them in your life, and share them.

I leave with you my testimony of who we are: children of God with divine purpose.

I know that God lives and that Jesus is the Christ. He is our Savior and Redeemer. The restored gospel of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has come forth under the direction of the Prophet Joseph Smith. It has given us the way to eternal happiness and salvation.

President Hinckley—our prophet, seer, and revelator in these times—leads us and guides us.

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May you have a good life, may you become what you want to be, and may you fulfill your dreams now and return with honor in the eternities, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.