

# *Our Individual Stewardship*

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Statistics was a difficult class for me. I didn't know how important it would be for me later on when I started doing research, so I didn't feel like I needed to give the course work much attention or dedication.

So naturally I felt uncomfortable when my professor began class one day exhorting us to consider the time, tithes, donations, and support given to contribute to our individual learning. I don't remember what he said exactly, but he suggested we honor those contributions by taking our education—even the smallest assignment—more seriously.

For the first time since I had arrived, I recognized within myself a feeling of entitlement—a mentality that I had earned my time here at BYU through my own efforts. This way of thinking had cheapened my education and led me to disregard the sacrifices that others had made to help me.

In his first encyclical, Pope John Paul II warned that we tend “to see no other meaning in [our] natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption.”<sup>1</sup> He was focusing primarily on our stewardship over nature. But I think this idea can be applied to

our perspective on almost anything. We often only find meaning in things to the point that we can use them for our gain.

This had become my mentality. Classes were valuable if they were entertaining or if they somehow furthered my personal interests. Anything beyond that was just another frustrating requirement that I had to get out of the way. I had stopped trying to find meaning in things if they didn't seem relevant to me at that exact moment. Even worse, I felt that I was justified in feeling this way because, after all, I had earned my time here. I should be able to use it as I liked.

But by thinking this way I had been hampering my progress as well as that of others. When we think of our opportunities as being owed to us, a pure and sacred source of motivation is lost. The truth is, we have been greatly blessed, and—for the most part—without any deservedness of ourselves. Our education and the degrees denoting it, which we will receive

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*Beth Black Peacock spoke as the representative of her graduating class at BYU commencement on 13 August 2015.*

tomorrow, are blessings from God and thus are ultimately another aspect of the stewardship that God has assigned each of us.

In Doctrine and Covenants 104:13, Christ revealed:

*It is expedient that I, the Lord, should make every man accountable, as a steward over earthly blessings, which I have made and prepared for my creatures.*

We can now choose to use that stewardship as God directs us or use it for our personal pleasure and gain.

More important, let us consider this question: How has God directed us to use our stewardship?

Following the murder of his brother Abel, Cain was confronted by the Lord: “Where is Abel thy brother?”

Cain responded with a question that points toward the purpose of our stewardship as disciples of Christ: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9).

Zygmunt Bauman, paraphrasing the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, said:

*From [this] question all immorality began. Of course I am my brother’s keeper; and I am and remain a moral person as long as I do not ask for a special reason to be one. Whether I admit it or not, I am my brother’s keeper because my brother’s well-being depends on what I do or refrain from doing. And I am a moral person because I recognize that dependence and accept the responsibility that follows. . . . My brother’s dependence is what makes me an ethical being. Dependence and ethics stand together and together they fall.<sup>2</sup>*

I would hope that everyone here has a desire to be moral individuals. I believe that the Honor Code that we have tried our best to uphold points us in that very direction. The root of morality, according to Levinas and Bauman, is recognizing our role as our

brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. Everything else—living the commandments, dedicating ourselves to our education, and drawing closer to God in any way—serves as a way to increase our awareness of that role, our desire to fulfill it, and our ability to do so.

Since that day in my statistics class and throughout approximately 100 hours of course work and a full-time mission, the Lord has continued to teach me in small ways that this concept is real—that my choices directly and indirectly sway all within my sphere of influence and many beyond that sphere and that, ultimately, *I am my brother’s keeper.*

Consider your degree. You are now equipped not just to make more money or provide for your future family—though these things are important—but also to be a better steward. This is a common mantra, both within the Church and around the world. You have been given greater power, knowledge, and capacity.

You now have greater responsibility.

Whenever anyone hears that I am in the landscape management program, they always seem to have something that they need help with—deciding what kind of shrub to plant on the shady side of their house or figuring out how to treat the aphids on their plum tree. In these small ways I can work toward fulfilling my stewardship.

Likewise, I guarantee that from here on out you will be faced with opportunities to use this power—both to get gain and, in other cases, to lift and help those around you. Which type of opportunity will motivate your choices and color your perspective?

I would like to finish with a few verses from the Doctrine and Covenants:

*And I consecrate unto them this [opportunity] for a little season, until I, the Lord, shall provide for them otherwise, and command them to go hence;*

*And the hour and the day is not given unto them, wherefore let them act upon this*

[opportunity] as for years, and this shall turn unto them for their good. . . .

*And whoso is found a faithful, a just, and a wise steward shall enter into the joy of his Lord, and shall inherit eternal life.*

*Verily, I say unto you, I am Jesus Christ, who cometh quickly, in an hour you think not. Even so. Amen. [D&C 51:16–17, 19–20]*

As we go forth to serve, let us remember our individual stewardship. Thank you.

#### Notes

1. John Paul II, “What Modern Man Is Afraid Of” (15), in Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis* (*The Redeemer of Man*), 4 March 1979, [w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_04031979\\_redemptor-hominis.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html).

2. Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2001), 72; emphasis in original.