

Devoted Discipleship

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It is wonderful to be here with you today. I come from a family of migrant farm workers, and I learned many lessons laboring with my parents and grandparents in the fields, vineyards, and orchards of the Central Valley of California. The Central Valley has some of the richest soil in the world, and farmers report that 100 percent of the nation's raisins,¹ 99 percent of its almonds,² and 95 percent of its olives³ are produced there.

My life changed forever when two young missionaries first visited our Central Valley home during the winter prior to my fourteenth birthday. My father was expert in the "law of the barrio," also known as "street law." He was highly skeptical of strangers and fiercely protective of our family. My mother recently reminded me of the time he called the police because he had spied someone who drove by and put a bomb into our mailbox. The police quickly responded to investigate, only to discover a batch of chocolate chip cookies. Obviously we were not used to the kindnesses expressed by members of the Church.

It was one of the greatest miracles I have ever witnessed when my father allowed the missionaries into our home. Because of the work of the missionaries, my father and mother and my younger brother, David, and I decided to become members of the Church.

One of the first activities I attended after my baptism was a church youth dance. I don't remember what I expected to experience, but when I walked into that church building and saw all of those beautiful Mormon girls, I knew the Church was true!

I am grateful to the missionaries who taught me the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the youth of the Church who welcomed me into a new way of life. Since those early years, family and friends, including many students, continue to teach me much about being a more devoted disciple of the Savior. Today I would like to share some thoughts with you on that topic.

Pruning of the Vine

I remember the foggy winter days I worked preparing raisin grape vineyards for the coming season's harvest. The vines were overrun with the past season's growth and needed pruning in order to produce good fruit. We would remove the suckers and the old and dead wood from the plant. We would then tie the new wood, or vines, to guide wires that were stretched between anchor posts.

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The vines were then fully exposed to the life-giving light of the sun and could produce plentiful fruit for the harvest.

Likening the vines to ourselves, we must be willing to allow the Lord to prune those dispositions, attributes, and cares of the world that prevent us from becoming devoted disciples of Jesus Christ.⁴ The Savior is the Lord of the vineyard and does the pruning. The guideposts of the vineyard are the principles of the gospel. The guide wires are the scriptures and the words of the living prophets. The light that gives light to the vine is the Spirit of the Lord. By allowing this pruning process, we can more fully expose our lives to that life-giving light so that we can produce plentiful fruit for the harvest.

Measuring Our Devotion to the Savior

Years ago Elder Neal A. Maxwell, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, visited our Central California stake. A visit from an apostle of the Lord was rare, and we all felt extremely privileged to have Elder Maxwell visit. At the time, Elder Maxwell was suffering from cancer, and the difficulty of his movement to and from the pulpit was quite apparent. Yet he was undeterred by his physical condition. He taught us powerfully, by word and deed, how we can measure our devotion to the Savior—a message he also delivered in general conference. He said:

*Let our gratitude . . . be expressed by striving to become, attribute by attribute, more and more as Jesus is (see 3 Ne. 27:27). By so living, ours will not then be a mere **appreciation** of Jesus, nor a modest **admiration** of Him. Rather, ours will be an **adoration** of Jesus expressed by our **emulation** of Him!*⁵

In light of Elder Maxwell's counsel, we might ask ourselves where we stand on this continuum. Do we merely appreciate the Savior? Do we have a modest admiration of

Him, or does our personal worship lead to daily decisions to more fully emulate Him?

Expressing Our Devotion to the Savior— Emulating His Attributes

President Ezra Taft Benson taught:

*The virtues outlined by Peter are part of the divine nature, or the Savior's character. These are the virtues we are to emulate if we would be more like Him.*⁶

Here is Peter's counsel to disciples in all ages:

Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge;

And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness;

*And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.*⁷

I believe it is significant that Peter counsels us to “add” one attribute to another, which suggests that our progression on the path to the greatest attribute, charity, is not attainable without some level of mastery of each of the preceding attributes. It has been helpful for me to view this path as an elevated continuum on which we can measure our progression.

As we study these attributes together, I pray that the Holy Ghost can teach each of us where we may be along the continuum and bring to our remembrance areas of improvement we can undertake in order to propel us forward and upward along the path to a more devoted discipleship.

Faith

The first step on the pathway to devoted discipleship is to exercise faith in the Savior's power to lift us to higher ground.

In my opinion, one of the most sorrowful episodes in all scripture is the story of the

young rich ruler. The scriptures tell us that the young ruler enthusiastically asked Jesus what he needed to do in order to gain eternal life. It was clear he appreciated or perhaps even admired Jesus. Jesus detailed the requirements of the law of Moses to the young ruler, who replied that he had kept these commandments all his life.

The young ruler then asked the Savior a pivotal question on which the test of his devotion would turn: “What lack I yet?”⁸

*Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me.*⁹

The young ruler went away sorrowful. Jesus had asked the young ruler for increased devotion—a commitment to keep a higher law. Can we imagine ourselves in a personal interview with the Savior in which He asks us to rise to the next level of devotion? Would we walk away sorrowful? Do we have faith in His ability to lift us to higher ground?

Virtue

Add unto faith virtue. The Savior said:

*The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness.*¹⁰

What enters our eyes can corrupt us both physically and spiritually. The time we spend with technology as well as what we choose to view can be measurements of our virtue.

Recently Arthur C. Brooks, a renowned social scientist, wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* titled “The Trick to Being More Virtuous.” In his article Brooks explained that what we choose to access on the Internet says much about our desires and thus our virtue. Borrowing a phrase from Brooks, we might ask ourselves, “What

will my next click say about [me]?”¹¹ Will it elevate my desires and my virtue?

We are living in the dispensation of the fulness of times with unprecedented advances in communication and access to information. This can be a great blessing to us and to others as we participate in hastening the work of the Lord. The Apostle Paul, however, foresaw the perilous times in which we would live when he said that many would be “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”¹² Aimless surfing of the Internet seems to fit his prophetic statement.

On the other hand, increased time in the scriptures can help us “to know the mysteries of God [and to] be given to reveal things which never have been revealed.”¹³ That is exciting to contemplate. The opportunity to study secular knowledge in the light of the gospel is what makes BYU a unique place. This kind of integrated learning can and does happen on this campus. Consider the blessing you can be to the world if your communications and your search for knowledge are focused and have this purpose in mind. The power of our learning environment is increased collectively as we individually allow “virtue [to] garnish [our] thoughts unceasingly.”¹⁴

Knowledge

Add to your virtue knowledge. We should diligently seek to know and appropriately use our spiritual gifts to liberate others from temporal and spiritual bondage.

If you are struggling to understand the direction you might take with your education or your career, I urge you to carefully study and understand the gifts of the Spirit. I believe the process of making your educational and career choices can be enhanced by discovering and using your unique spiritual gifts. The doctrine of spiritual gifts is set forth in the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants—three distinctive canons of scripture. I believe this adds additional significance to their importance.

Consider some of these marvelous gifts:

- the gift of knowledge
- the gift of wisdom
- the gift of discernment
- the gift of tongues
- the gift of healing
- the gift of understanding the diversity of operations
- the gift of knowing the differences of administration¹⁵

In addition to gifts of the Spirit, we each have unique aptitudes, abilities, capacities, and talents to offer this world. Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught:

*When we pass from preexistence to mortality, we bring with us the traits and talents there developed. . . . And all men with their infinitely varied talents and personalities pick up the course of progression where they left it off when they left the heavenly realms.*¹⁶

My grandfather, Carl Hernandez Sr., immigrated to the United States from Mexico and settled in the Central Valley of California, where he worked as a grafter of fruit trees. Grafting is useful for many purposes, including providing trees with a strong root system that is resistant to drought, disease, decay, and poor soil conditions. Grafting also allows for an increased production of desirable fruit.

The rootstock, which consists of the roots and the trunk of a tree, forms the foundation for the graft. Like a growing tree, you have a strong rootstock. Your divine nature as a child of heavenly parents gives you the potential to become like Them. On a grafted tree, branches from another tree, or scions, are attached to a strong, established rootstock. You possess natural gifts, aptitudes, capacities, and talents that are part of your rootstock. We have also been commanded to earnestly seek after “the best gifts”¹⁷ as well as additional talents.¹⁸

Acquired gifts and talents are like the scions that are attached to our rootstock. Increasing your spiritual gifts and talents will allow you to “bear much fruit.”¹⁹

I invite you to gain a knowledge of your unique natural gifts and talents and to diligently seek and acquire others. The integration of your spiritual gifts into the work you do in this life can both empower you and add joy in your service to others.

Temperance

Add unto knowledge temperance. Temperance requires that we exercise self-control over an impulse to think, act, or speak out in a way that is inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Consider the following hypothetical situation. You are late to class and are driving around what appears to be a full Y lot looking for a parking stall. Suddenly one appears, and you patiently wait as the driver exits the stall, only to have someone swerve in from the opposite direction to take the spot. How you react in this hypothetical situation can say a lot about whether you are a temperate person. This past year a national television station dedicated an entire news story titled “Parking Lot Wars” to reporting the broad spectrum of behaviors shown by those who have parking-stall encounters.²⁰ People have lost lives, limbs, and their dignity because they have been unable to temper their thoughts, words, and deeds in these simple circumstances.

Our daily reactions, simple or complex, should be *tempered* by always keeping an eternal perspective in focus.

Patience

Add to temperance patience. When I was a young boy, my grandparents, Ignacio and Patricia Noriega, patiently taught me how to pick olives. Olives are harvested by carefully

“milking” each olive from each branch of the tree. It is one of the most tedious and labor intensive of all farm labor tasks.

One thing I learned early in my picking experience is that olives off the tree don’t exactly taste like the olives you eat out of the can! The fruit is hard and extremely bitter. Just in case you are tempted, this is not an item you would want to add to your “raw food” diet.

In order for an olive to become edible, it must be processed in a lye solution for several days in order to leach out the bitter taste.

Like this process, the bitter challenges and chastenings of life, both large and small, require that we exercise patience, endure well, and trust in the Lord’s ability to cleanse and purify us. The Apostle Paul taught:

*Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness.*²¹

Godliness

Add to patience godliness. A few years ago my brother gave me some of the mission statements that his brothers in the Hanford California Third Branch had written. Here are a few lines from those statements:

I want to lift the hands that hang down and strengthen the feeble knees.

Is anything too hard for the Lord?

I will always say, “Here am I, Lord, send me!”

At first glance, nothing seems unusual about these statements. The men of the Hanford Third Branch, however, are those who hold their services in the California state prison at Avenal. Every week, and sometimes multiple times a week, President Ralph Morrill would faithfully visit the brethren of the Hanford Third Branch. Most of society consider these men to be without hope, but not President Morrill. He inspired these men to write mission statements and to have hope for the future. He

visited my brother, David, in what would be his darkest hour—the day David learned that his meek and gentle teenage son had lost his life in a senseless act of violence.

Because of President Morrill’s service, my brother, David, has transformed his life. Since David was released from prison almost three years ago, he has helped bring many of his friends to the gospel of Jesus Christ. He has earned four semesters of 4.0 grades and will graduate from the local community college this spring. I will be there to celebrate his graduation, and so will President Morrill.

President Morrill has invited many men of the Hanford Third Branch to devote their lives to preparing to enter the house of the Lord, where “the power of godliness is manifest.”²²

I believe that President Morrill has attained the attribute of godliness, which involves the capacity to see the divine potential in others and an unfailing dedication to helping them to achieve that potential.

Brotherly Kindness

Add unto godliness brotherly kindness. I remember a story told by Jon Huntsman Sr. about a visit he made to President Howard W. Hunter one day. The story greatly impressed me.

Brother Huntsman decided to visit President Hunter and found him to be sick. President Hunter said that he was feeling terrible pain in his body, and he asked Brother Huntsman to give him a blessing. Brother Huntsman then asked President Hunter what he thought was causing his illness. President Hunter told him that he had had an unkind thought about another man and it made him physically sick all day.²³

When I first heard that story, I thought, “There is no hope for me!” However, whenever I am tempted to treat another unkindly, I try to remember President Hunter’s example of brotherly kindness.

Charity

Add unto brotherly kindness charity. When I was a young boy, my Grandfather Ignacio gave my brother, David, and me a used bicycle as a gift. We quickly thanked him and sped off to give the gift a test ride. When we returned from our ride, my mother asked us to go to a nearby phone booth and telephone our grandfather to thank him for the bike.

We arrived at the booth and waited several minutes to make the call. Realizing that the woman using the phone would not leave anytime soon, we decided that it would be best to go to another pay telephone. As we got on the bike to leave, a police officer arrived in his patrol car. The woman who had delayed us immediately left the booth and protested loudly and emphatically, “That is my child’s bicycle. It was stolen several months ago.”

The police officer asked where we had gotten the bicycle, and we answered that we had just received it as a gift from our grandfather. The officer loaded us and the bicycle into the patrol car and took us home, where he asked that my mother produce some proof of purchase for the bike. After my mother called my grandfather from a neighbor’s phone, my grandfather arrived and presented a receipt for the bike’s purchase. The receipt showed that he had purchased the bike that very morning at the police station auction, where unclaimed and recovered property was sold.

The officer had a dilemma to resolve. Give the bike to the pleading mother or give the bike to us, the recent purchasers. I am sure you have come to your own conclusions based on what you perceive to have been the fairest course of action.

The officer returned the bicycle to the woman who had claimed it to be rightfully her child’s. Of course my brother and I were devastated. At the time I felt it was a serious injustice for the officer to have taken the bicycle and given it to this stranger. As time

passed, my legal education here at the BYU Law School only reinforced my feelings about our loss.

After law school I returned to work in the city where this bike episode had occurred, and I became one of its city attorneys. Ironically, I remember analyzing and applying the very law that should have prevented the officer from taking my first bike had the law been applied correctly.

It is only in more recent years that I have come to understand the lasting lesson that my grandfather taught me on that day—one that lives longer in my heart than the bicycle ever could. In my mind’s eye I have come to understand that he must have seen something in that mother’s face, a tired yearning for compassion, that caused him to allow the bicycle to be returned to its rightful owner.

That day my grandfather taught me a higher law, the second great commandment: how to love your neighbor. My grandfather demonstrated and exercised the gift of charity for another human being.

And charity suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.²⁴

Loving the Lord

The first great commandment requires that we love God with all our heart, might, mind, and strength. Let me share a short video that shows how my brothers and sisters in the Central Valley of California demonstrated that love by pruning vines on Christmas Day in the Lord’s vineyard.²⁵ [A video clip was shown.]

In this instance, members from the Madera Spanish Ward gave up their Christmas because of their love for the Savior, and I am inspired by their devotion to Him.

Faith, Hope, and Charity

The continuum begins with faith and ends with charity, or the pure love of Christ. Charity requires that we love the Savior and all people through the development and mastery of His attributes. Please note that mastery of each of the attributes on the continuum is dependent on our understanding and application of the principle of hope. We must have hope and believe that through Christ we can be more virtuous, knowledgeable, temperate, patient, godly, and kind.

Wherefore, whoso believeth in God might with surety hope for a better world, yea, even a place at the right hand of God, which hope cometh of faith, maketh an anchor to the souls of men, which would make them sure and steadfast, always abounding in good works, being led to glorify God.²⁶

I testify that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He lives and that He loves us. May we do all within our power to become His devoted disciples is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. The California Raisin Industry, calraisins.org/about/the-raisin-industry.

2. Welcome to Central Valley Almond Association (CVAA), centralvalleyalmond.com.

3. About the Olive Industry, calolive.org/our-story/about-olive-industry.

4. See, for example, Jacob 5.

5. Neal A. Maxwell, "From the Beginning," *Ensign*, November 1993, 20; emphasis added.

6. Ezra Taft Benson, "Godly Characteristics of the Master," *Ensign*, November 1986, 45.

7. 2 Peter 1:5–7.

8. Matthew 19:20.

9. Mark 10:21.

10. Luke 11:34.

11. Arthur C. Brooks, "The Trick to Being More Virtuous," Opinion Pages, *New York Times*, 27 November 2014.

12. 2 Timothy 3:7.

13. Alma 26:22.

14. D&C 121:45.

15. See D&C 46.

16. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: 1979–81), 1:25; see also p. 23.

17. D&C 46:8.

18. See Matthew 25:21.

19. John 15:8.

20. See "Parking Lot Wars," *20/20*, ABC News, 25 April 2014.

21. Hebrews 12:11.

22. D&C 84:20.

23. See Jon Huntsman Sr., "Lifting Others," *Clark Memorandum*, spring 2006, 22–23.

24. Moroni 7:45.

25. See *Madera Miracle*, 23 December 2011, ldsphilanthropies.org/humanitarian-services/news-features/madera-miracle.html.

26. Ether 12:4.