

“Understand Who You Are”

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The first thing I want to say today is that I want to testify I know Jesus Christ is our Savior and our Redeemer. I know by the power of the Holy Ghost that He stands at the head of this Church, guiding it through a living prophet, Gordon B. Hinckley. I am so thankful for that testimony.

It is a sweet experience for Sister Oaks and me to be here on the BYU campus this morning. This is not our first BYU devotional. We started attending them in September 1951 when we were sophomores at BY High School on the old BYU lower campus, where the Provo City Library is now located.

A great deal has changed on this campus since 1951, but one thing that has remained constant is the sweet spirit you bring to the devotional setting.

I know why Gloria and I are here today. The First Presidency sent me a letter assigning me to talk on March 21st at the BYU—Provo devotional, so here we are.

A more interesting question is, “Why are *you* here at BYU this morning?” A university education anywhere takes a lot of time, effort, and money. And there can be a lot of frustration found on the campus.

—Maybe someone pointed out to you that university graduates get better jobs and make more money.

—Or a friend may have convinced you that you can have a lot of fun in college.

—Or maybe you came hoping to find a spouse.

—Certainly you can become a more interesting person through your education.

—And you should be able to learn to see life through a richer set of lenses.

Hopefully these and all of your other aspirations and expectations will be realized.

But I would like to discuss another purpose for higher education—especially at BYU. This school experience should provide you with the opportunity to determine your true identity—to find out who you really are.

During our assignment in the Africa Southeast Area Presidency, Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

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came down to conduct an area training session. During that session Elder Nelson made a statement that resonated in my heart then and continues to do so today. He said, “Understand who you are in God’s plan.” This is a powerful concept that should be a major objective of our life here in mortality: to understand who we are in God’s plan.

What a sweet blessing it is to come to know—to gain a testimony by the power of the Holy Ghost—that there is a God and that He has a plan with an exalted purpose for each of His children. It is also a very powerful, personal driving factor to be able to accept that we each can have a particular role to play in this plan.

This brings us to your unique BYU opportunity. While you are here, you owe it to yourself to make an extra effort to discover, in every detail possible, who you really are—to discover your true potential and your eternal potential in God’s plan.

The vast majority of you came to BYU with a foundation in the basic doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Consequently you should have a solid understanding of your eternal potential. You know you are a child of God, a son or a daughter of a loving Father who has structured a glorious plan for the salvation and happiness of each of His children.

You understand that we were in the presence of our Father in Heaven in premortal councils, where His plan was presented to all of His children. We accepted His plan. Jesus Christ was there, and He became the leading advocate for the plan—the objective of which is to provide all of God’s children the opportunity to come to earth, obtain a body, and, during our period of mortal probation, prove ourselves in faith, repentance, obedience, and enduring to the end. We accepted that we would one day stand before the Lord Jesus Christ and be judged on our performance during our period of mortal probation. Those found worthy would be exalted and would

dwell eternally in the presence of the Father and the Son, with eternal family relationships prevailing. All others would be assigned to kingdoms of lesser glory.

You also know that in order to give life and vitality to His plan—and because of His perfect love for each of His children—this loving Father offered up His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, that through His atoning sacrifice in Gethsemane and on the cross at Calvary He would become the Savior of all mankind, the eternal hope of the world. Through His sacrifice He would ensure resurrection from the grave for all, as well as provide the opportunity for forgiveness for every repentant soul.

You know that without a Savior there is no plan of salvation and happiness, because without the Savior there can be no expectation for resurrection nor for forgiveness, and thus no hope for perfection and celestial worthiness, no hope of dwelling eternally in the presence of God as a celestial being, no hope of enjoying the promised “fulness of joy” that is an integral part of celestial existence.

What a blessing it is to have this solid, revealed-from-on-high doctrine as a foundation upon which to build our lives and as a foundation for our trust and hope in eternal happiness. It is the foundation for our faith and hope that our Father in Heaven has made such happiness available to His sons and daughters.

But are these glorious, majestic understandings enough? They are certainly critical underpinnings for our eternal progression, but to reach our divine, eternal potential, I think they are only the beginning. We are each individuals with singular talents, strengths, opportunities, and challenges. We are as individual as are our fingerprints or our DNA. Unfortunately we cannot discover our individuality as easily as we can identify ourselves with our fingerprints or our DNA.

We believe we are foreordained to come to earth at a particular time into particular circumstances and that our particular set of

gifts, attitudes, and talents—if properly developed and employed—will enable us to fulfill our foreordained purpose.

Elder Henry B. Eyring of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles tells a tender personal story that makes this point in a penetrating way. When he was a teenager his family moved from a very comfortable environment for young Elder Eyring to a location that was not to his liking. He sulked for a bit until the Spirit spoke directly to him about who he was in God's plan and how he ought to proceed. One day the Spirit instructed, "When you find who you are, you will be sorry you didn't try harder." I suspect this spiritual admonition for more diligent effort is probably appropriate for most of us. The Lord will lead us in our particular role if we will seek and follow His guidance.

Christ Himself during His ministry is the greatest example of one who understood who He was and the full magnitude of His mortal and eternal potential. His success during His mortal probation is, in part, a reflection of this understanding. As a 12-year-old boy who had been left behind in the temple, He reproved His worrying parents, "How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" (Luke 2:49).

Christ's ministry is filled with statements highlighting His complete understanding of His mortal and His eternal destiny.

In John 18:37 we read the interchange between Pilate and Christ:

Pilate . . . said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth.

Christ demonstrated this same remarkable degree of self-awareness when He stated:

Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and

shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me.

These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. [John 16:32–33]

In fact, everything we know about Christ suggests that He understood exactly who He was and exactly what He was expected to do in His life—thanks be to God.

For us to move in the desired direction for our own life, we must come to know ourselves. We must study, stretch, and test ourselves and ponder the results of our stretching and our testing and other observations. We need to become familiar with our own particular set of gifts and talents. And there is no better place on earth—nor any better time to carry on this get-acquainted-with-yourself process—than here as a student at BYU.

Why is this getting-to-know-yourself process so important? Because it will enable you to do more with your life. It will permit you to come closer to realizing your full potential. It will let you build on and use your strengths, your gifts, and your talents to carry out your purpose in God's plan. It will help you overcome your weaknesses and avoid your vulnerabilities. We pray to God, "Suffer us not to be led into temptation" (JST, Matthew 6:14). Shouldn't we do our best to know our weaknesses so that we can help God "lead us not into our own personal set of temptations?"

When considering one's gifts and talents, it is important to first acknowledge that everyone has gifts. I believe this is a truth with both temporal gifts and with spiritual gifts. Regarding spiritual gifts, the scriptures are very clear on the subject. Section 46 of the Doctrine and Covenants highlights for us that everyone is given a spiritual gift and then enumerates these gifts:

Seek ye earnestly the best gifts, always remembering for what they are given; . . .

. . . they are given for the benefit of those who love me and keep all my commandments, and him that seeketh so to do. . . .

For all have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God.

To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be profited thereby. . . .

[Then, after listing many of these gifts, the scripture concludes:] *And all these gifts come from God, for the benefit of the children of God.*

[D&C 46:8–9, 11–12, 26]

Ponder for a moment the beautiful gospel principle disclosed in this scripture. In a world so filled with despairing souls lacking a sense of personal worth, it is most uplifting to know that each one of us is endowed, from on high, with at least one spiritual gift.

We ought to be striving to discover our spiritual gifts. When we know them, we can polish them, hone them, and use them to bless the lives of those about us.

The parable of the talents as recorded in Matthew 25:14–30 clearly makes the doctrinal point that the Lord expects us to use whatever gifts and talents with which He has blessed us.

You will recall the story: A wealthy man, planning to travel, gave one servant five talents, which the servant promptly doubled through wise management.

To the second servant the wealthy man gave two talents, which this servant also doubled through his prudence.

To the third servant he gave only one talent, which he promptly buried to ensure its security.

Upon his return the wealthy man praised the two wise managers for their prudent use of their assigned portions, and he rewarded them bountifully.

On the other hand, the servant who had failed to magnify his calling and hid his

portion in the ground was relieved of his talent, left with none, and “cast . . . into outer darkness [midst] weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 25:30).

The Lord expects us to take what He has given us and build upon it, expand it, use it, and share it. He expects us to bless the lives of others through our gifts and, in so doing, bless our own lives.

One of the purposes of patriarchal blessings is to help us identify our special gifts and talents. Through these blessings the Lord can help focus our attention and awareness on particular fields or interests in which we are especially adept. These blessings can serve a very important role in helping us to understand who we are in God’s plan. We should read them carefully, reread them, and then endeavor to live our lives in such a way that the Lord can bless us with all of the blessings He has promised us.

I believe that temporal gifts are much the same story as spiritual gifts. We each have temporal gifts—we just have to uncover and polish them so we may experience joy and satisfaction in using them throughout our lives. Some of these gifts are special aptitudes for music, for teaching, for learning, for athletics, for administration, etc., etc., etc.

University years are a time to find and cultivate these gifts. This is why we take aptitude and other interest tests: to discover what is possible, given our native abilities and inclinations. This is a main reason why we have general education courses: to broaden our perspective and to expose us to a variety of disciplines to see if they might be attractive and interesting to us. These tests and introductory courses are an important part of your getting-to-know-yourself portion of your university experience. Then, in our majors and minors, we polish particularly interesting gifts that we might want to use throughout our life—not just in our work but also in our Church, our community, and our family service endeavors.

The social experience on campus is also an important part of the getting-to-know-yourself portion of your collegiate life. It is much more than one big “spouse search.” It is an opportunity to buff off a few personality burrs that may have slipped through your high school days. It is a time to gain better insights to such personal personality traits as toleration for stress, capacity for work, need for privacy, and innumerable other characteristics of your individuality. This self-awareness lets you make wiser choices regarding dates and mates, vocations and locations.

I repeat: This is a good time to find and polish your gifts and your talents. It ought to be a conscious objective that you find out and obtain the most out of your undergraduate years. It can be a very important part of your quest to “understand who you are in God’s plan.”

In part, our particular role in God’s plan is a reflection of these talents and gifts. The parable of the talents was not given to us for our entertainment but rather for our spiritual instruction. It is indicative of an eternal principle that is often summed up with “where much is given, much is expected.” Our gifts and our talents are important elements of our true and complete identity. They are important factors in determining our role in God’s plan.

Let me give you a couple of examples from the life that I know best: my own. In high school I thought I was a pretty good athlete, and I wanted to play college ball. I went out for football here at BYU and promptly got cut. Then I went out for basketball and promptly got cut. I didn’t bother with baseball and tennis.

But I wasn’t convinced of my limitations, even though everyone else seemed to be fully aware of them. I went to the Air Force Academy, and one strong motivation was that I wanted another go at collegiate athletics. With only 300 cadets on campus at that time, the odds were much better. So I played football, basketball, and baseball my first year in

Colorado. But my maturing capacity for introspection as well as knee surgery made me realize that I was quite mediocre even on my better days. Based on that realization I made some adjustments to my life goals. I have enjoyed a lifetime of participating in sports, but I was able to measure success and happiness in terms of participation rather than in excellence of performance.

This is a time to discover talents and interests that will be of satisfaction to you for the rest of your lives. When I was a freshman here at BYU, Janie Thompson—a BYU legend in finding and developing talent—asked me if I would participate in a song and dance number she was producing for some sort of conference. I agreed. But after a few practices, Janie said, “Bob, I like your enthusiasm, but you are not much of a singer.” Since then I have not sought opportunities to stand in front of audiences and sing. But I have found numerous rewards for enthusiasm.

Through all of this, I did learn that I could work as hard as almost anyone. That was not a native skill; my dad taught me how to work, and all of my life I have been able to keep up with the hardest of workers. This became one of the most important lessons from my college life. Your successes highlight your gifts; your disappointments help you learn your limitations. And these are very important lessons that affect directly who you are in God’s plan. These lessons play a major role in helping you determine your true identity.

One of the great blessings of understanding our true eternal identity as a child of God is that our personal sense of self-worth can only be high. There are no born losers in God’s frame of reference. He loves each one of His children. We are each His son or daughter with the potential to become like Him. In the gospel plan based on moral agency, we fail only if we make choices that lead to failure. But in that same light, we can make choices that will lead to our marvelous success. One of the great

beauties of the gospel is that critical decisions are ours for the making.

We have talked in some detail about the importance of understanding who we are and the magnitude of our divine potential. Now let us briefly discuss a significant threat to our achieving this potential. Today we receive many warnings about identity theft. Some of you may have already experienced the trauma resulting from this fraud.

In our cybernetic world of trust and of rapid transmission of personal data—medical, financial, and all other types of data—we are very vulnerable to theft and exploitation of our identifying details. Consequently, billions of dollars are spent each year on identity security systems, and they are not always successful. We can be defrauded of significant amounts of money by identity thieves.

Several years ago Sister Oaks and I were traveling during an assignment in Europe. At the end of one month we received a \$20,000 credit card bill after we had spent only about \$35 in a particular city. Crooks had our numbers, and they threw them around with reckless abandon. That was our introduction to identity theft. The credit card company stood behind the debt, but it was frightening to see how helpless we were to prevent our identity from being stolen.

Theft of our numerical mortal identity can be costly and cause us a great deal of misery. But the theft of our eternal identity has much longer effects and more dire consequences. I am not talking about addresses, credit card security, or any other identifying numbers. I am talking about something much more basic and more important than who the world thinks you are. I am talking about who *you* think you are.

Let's discuss briefly the possibility of you losing your eternal identity. We know we are sons and daughters of God with the potential to become like Him, as described in His plan of happiness. We know this potential is achieved through our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and

through obedience to the eternal laws and principles embedded in His gospel. We also know that Satan is totally dedicated to thwarting and derailing all of this marvelous plan-of-happiness knowledge and process. We know that one of his primary tools is to entice us to forget who we really are—to fail to realize or to forget our divine potential. This is the cruelest form of identity theft.

How does Satan do it? He is quite straightforward and predictable. First, he attempts to prompt doubts in our minds about our divine potential. He even cultivates doctrine in the world implying we are much less than we really are. He undermines our faith—and thus our self-confidence in our ability to achieve our potential. Even if we do understand and accept it, he still cultivates this doubt. He strives to bring us to a mind-set in which we believe that we, individually, are not good enough to ever achieve our celestial goals.

In this same vein Satan seeks to convince us that we are so bad that even the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ is not sufficient to reach down to our lowly depths and draw us up unto our Savior. He tempts us into paths that seem to verify his cynicism about our grand and glorious potential.

He then hedges his bets by surrounding us with the gaudy, glitzy filth of pornography and other forms of immorality and thus precludes our being led in saintly paths by the Holy Spirit. He is a clever fellow with many clever tricks to make us forget who we really are: sons and daughters of God with divine potential.

Let's summarize Satan's basic method of operation: he strives to make us forget who we are. By cheap, temporary imitations of true and lasting joy he dims our memory and fogs our testimony. Through the false gods of expensive toys, unbridled passions, honors and praises of the world, and fleeting pleasures he leads us away from the divine promises of eternal, lasting fulness of joy.

We do not understand, we cannot comprehend completely the promised fulness of joy. We have to accept its wonder and its beauty on faith. The term is quite descriptive. *Fulness* implies that there is no room for more joy. The scriptural promises are breathtaking. Doctrine and Covenants 93:33 and 76:92, 94, and 95 are as explicit as I think we can expect:

For man is spirit. The elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy. [D&C 93:33]

And thus we saw the glory of the celestial, which excels in all things—where God, even the Father, reigns upon his throne forever and ever. . . .

They who dwell in his presence are the church of the Firstborn; and they see as they are seen, and know as they are known, having received of his fulness and of his grace;

And he makes them equal in power, and in might, and in dominion. [D&C 76:92, 94–95]

Satan does not want us to understand and focus on these marvelous descriptions and promises of our divine potential, but the Lord certainly does. He wants us to focus on them and to ponder their meaning in our lives. They are clearly worth some pondering time. If we will salt our pondering with scriptures such as we have just read, we can refresh our commitment to move forward and upward on our plan-of-happiness track.

Let's take a moment and review what we have considered this morning. Our Eternal Father in Heaven has a plan of salvation and happiness for us. Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh, is at the center of this plan by virtue of His atoning sacrifice. We have a central role in this plan of happiness by virtue of our divine parentage.

To fulfill our role in this plan it is important for us to come to understand ourselves, our strengths, our weaknesses, our gifts, and our

talents and to learn to use them in building up the kingdom of God.

Satan will certainly try to derail us from this simple, straightforward, and supremely important course. He will attempt to make us forget who we are and what our divine potential is. And he will strive to this end until he is bound during Christ's millennial reign.

The Lord has provided us with countless scriptures and prophetic promptings to help us counter and resist these satanic pulls. One of the most powerful of these promptings is found in the fifth chapter of Helaman. Here Helaman, under the Lord's direction, counseled his sons, Nephi and Lehi, and he repeatedly admonished them to remember who they were and from whence their marvelous spiritual heritage came:

And now, my sons, remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall. [Helaman 5:12]

This remembering is a very important principle to help us keep in mind our true identity. This is why we partake of the sacrament each week: to renew our covenants we have made with the Lord in the waters of baptism; to remember Him and to keep His commandments; to refresh in our minds who we are and what our role is in God's plan.

This is why we go back to the temple: to renew our covenants that we have made in those sacred halls and to remind ourselves of these covenants and obligations.

When we thus remember these sacred obligations, Satan's storms and attacks will

not turn us from our quest—from pursuing our divine potential. I pray that we may ever remember who we are: sons and daughters of a loving Father who have the potential to return to His side and dwell with Him as celestial beings.

I testify that these things are true. I testify that Jesus Christ is our Savior and our Redeemer and that He stands at the head of this Church, guiding it through a living prophet, even Gordon B. Hinckley. I offer this testimony in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.