

# Accepting Personal Responsibility

HUGH W. PINNOCK

I would like to talk with you today about an area in your life that we sometimes address superficially but don't discuss in-depth nor understand. I would like to talk with you about the importance of taking responsibility for everything you do.

"The least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousandfold," wrote Aristotle in the fourth century B.C. (*On the Heavens*, book 1, chapter 5, lines 8–10). If a baseball pitcher lets go of the ball just one inch away from where it should be released, the ball will end up nine or ten feet away from where it should be by the time it's supposed to reach the batter. Little errors in the beginning do lead to serious consequences in the end. The breaking of one of the least significant commandments today is how more severe laws of God are broken tonight or tomorrow. Unfortunately, one of the most comfortable mistakes that a college student or anyone else can make that leads to eventual disaster is leaving the decisions of one's behavior to others.

I'd like to say something else about taking responsibility. Don't we all get a little bit fed up in an environment where we are legislated for, told what to do, and sometimes given guidelines that at best are appropriate for the speaker only or for the person telling us what to do but

certainly not for us? I want to talk with you about freedom in its most pure form. When you leave to others the decisions that affect you, your self-understanding is diminished, your personal progress is always retarded, and your feelings of self-value are clouded and reduced.

## Self-Determination

Around Christmas of last year I visited the Wilberg Mine in Emery County where disaster had struck a few days earlier. The sheriff's office was kind in letting our car through the barriers blocking the road, and we progressed up the hill where smoke was belching out of one of the entrances to the mine. We approached the area where a type of mission control was directing what needed to be done at that tragic time. As we were being brought up-to-date on the rescue efforts by the foreman, a short, but obviously powerful miner came up and started jerking on the foreman's jacket.

---

*Hugh W. Pinnock was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 25 June 1985.*

“Send me back in, send me back in,” he demanded.

“No, no. You’ve been in enough. We must send someone else.”

“No, I want to go, I want to go,” he pled.

A man whose coal-dusted and greasy face was stained with tears wanted to be back where he might be able to save another’s life.

“Well, all right, but you must be second,” the foreman said.

“No, I want to be the lead man.”

That was the most dangerous position to be in. Finally, the foreman let him go. We watched that courageous, feisty little man going back into the mine with ropes and different equipment hanging from him. He had captured the love and respect of all of us. The other miners sat along the wall waiting for their turn, but they had been outmaneuvered by a man who had decided months or perhaps years earlier that if there ever was an opportunity for him to perhaps save another’s life, he wanted to be where the action was.

My mind wanders back to another year and very different circumstances. I visited a man in a hospital. He was in an iron lung, a type of therapy that is rarely used today. He had no control over his body from his chin down. We talked of the disease that had rendered him in that condition and of his occupation. He was an insurance man, dialing the telephone with his nose or with his tongue, explaining to people that he could not come into their homes or into their offices but that he would like them to visit him at his address, which was the hospital, so he could talk with them about perhaps saving a few dollars on their car or life insurance.

Most hung up on him before he even had a chance to deliver his message, but a few would come to the hospital and sit next to that remarkable man as he would look into a series of reflecting mirrors, analyzing their insurance policies and telling them of ways they could have more effective coverage. He had decided

before disaster struck that he was going to do everything he could to be self-sustaining. Of course, the Church was helping him, and the state of Utah was providing some assistance, but so much of his self-care was being provided through the courage he was displaying then and had displayed earlier.

One of our finest missionaries was leaving Pennsylvania. Two young women had waited for him. (Most of us found ourselves without anyone waiting for us.) In his last interview he wanted to talk with me about situations that might occur when he returned home. One young woman, who happened to be an airline stewardess, seemed to be his favorite. Yet she had not been careful about the way she lived in relation to sexual purity. The other young woman had announced before his mission that she would not participate in anything that was not appropriate.

“What should I do, President?”

I said, “You’ll know what to do, Elder. But just remember the two years you have served so well in Pennsylvania. Remember those things we have learned together, and remember what you really believe in.”

Well, he returned home and went to the apartment of his airline stewardess. He found as they went on a date that evening that things had not changed—he was sick inside. He later took out the other young woman, then called to report the activities of those two evenings. The young woman who had decided to live the commandments long before she ever met him had so deeply impressed the young man that from that time on he dated just her. Now they are living happily. Yes, now they are living the way that most of us would like to live.

I have another story that is not unlike that one. A man had moved from Ohio to Brigham City and was working for Morton Thiokol, the company that manufactures so much of what goes into space. He had dated several young women and had noticed a beautiful young lady working there. He asked her for a date

and she consented. They went out, and he began to do things that she did not want to do. There was a tussle, but she succeeded and arrived home almost as safe as she had left.

The following Monday the man was telling of the conquest he had attempted but failed and was making fun of her. A fine young man stood nearby, a returned missionary—he hadn't been home long. After the people had dispersed, he walked over and asked for the name of that young woman. He was told and they dated for about three months before I had the privilege of performing their marriage in the Salt Lake Temple. They had decided what they wanted, and their righteous actions were rewarded.

Now, while some of these decisions loom large, others may seem microscopic; yet what happens is exciting. Elder Thomas S. Monson reported an experience he had at a stake conference with a projectionist, a man with the surname of Hales. He was showing a movie that was the featured part of a training meeting when suddenly film started spewing everywhere. Elder Monson stood up and asked what was wrong. The young man said, "Elder Monson, I did something really stupid." He didn't blame the machine. He didn't blame the projectionist who had shown the film on an earlier occasion. He didn't blame the film itself. He blamed himself, and Elder Monson reported how he appreciated that type of courage. That young man was not in a blaming posture. He had decided to take responsibility. Just a little teeny experience, but it affected the thinking of an apostle.

### **Decisions Leading to Joyful Living**

What are some areas where you can and perhaps should take responsibility during your college or mission experience or during life? Let me state that question just a little differently. If you are about the exciting task of living happily today, and want joy and peace forever, what areas of life must you take personal responsibility for?

The most important things you must decide upon are areas of your life about which you will sit alone and contemplate, think, and pray, and you may jot down on a piece of paper the decisions you have made. Let me talk with you about several of these areas and the decisions I know lead to happy and joyful living.

### **Living the Commandments**

The first is this: Are you willing to live the commandments and follow suggestions from a loving Heavenly Father? As I look into your faces this day, I see a group of young people who are about to change the world, if you will, in happy ways. But isn't the very foundation of living (at least if we love the Savior) to live his commandments? Not only the biggies, but also the suggestions. Not only commandments such as having personal integrity, living a sexually pure life, and not taking into our divinely created bodies illicit drugs, but the suggestions such as "ask, seek, and knock," go the extra mile, and be willing to forgive ourselves when we have made mistakes.

### **"What Are Your Priorities?"**

The second area of your life that perhaps needs to be addressed is how you are spending your time. A young coed at this university had determined that she was going to succeed in one of the professions. That was first and foremost. A young man was dating her, wanting the relationship to deepen and perhaps lead to the temple. But she was involved in succeeding in her chosen profession to the injury, perhaps, of other possibilities.

Her boyfriend asked if I would talk with her while visiting BYU one day, so we did walk and talk together. I asked her a simple question, "What are your priorities?" "To be married eternally, to raise a family, to live the commandments. I would like to succeed in my profession. I enjoy going to school. I want good grades."

Even though the last three were vital, none of them were number one. I then asked her, “Is that the way you are living?” She then knew that her boyfriend had asked me talk with her. She said she thought she was beginning to understand.

What are your priorities? Are your afternoons wasted? Do you go to bed a little bit better than you were when you woke up?

### **Social Responsibility**

Third—this is going to startle some of you—you must take responsibility for your dating skills, for your social skills. We can’t rely upon others to always be inviting us to go somewhere. We must be the type of people who are giving and sharing their lives with others in proper ways.

I have had so many wonderful young people in my office. While they were struggling with certain areas of their lives, they somehow thought that what concerned them would automatically take care of itself. It never does! They had not taken personal responsibility. Because of that, their life was not going as they wished it would, socially or in other ways.

### **Financial Responsibility**

Next is something that only too often we disregard on college campuses in the lives of young people. That is financial responsibility and the development of a personal budgeting system. All resources are limited, and because of that, there is a certain responsibility to use what we have properly. Our roommate cannot use our resources properly, nor can our friends. We must do it ourselves. We must decide not to be wasteful of money but to develop habits of frugality.

### **Responsibility for Your Appearance**

Fifth—this will also startle some of you, and I don’t want it to—you must take personal responsibility for your appearance, for the scenery that you provide for others. It is not up

to your roommates. It is not up to anyone else. It is up to you. This suggestion, of course, leads to your taking responsibility for your health and keeping physically fit.

### **Responsibility for Your Environment**

Sixth is our environment. I don’t mean conducting environmental impact studies of Utah Lake as it encroaches upon farmland. I mean your apartment and the interior of your automobile. Do you pick up a few papers and deposit them in the round file when you leave because they were unsightly and someone else had not been thoughtful?

While dating my wife when she attended BYU, I brought a friend of mine to Provo. We were going to double-date that evening. I had become acquainted with a marvelous young woman in the mission field and I wanted him to meet her.

I knew a little bit about his home and where he was from. He had been raised in poverty. His parents could not afford furniture, so they didn’t have any furniture. Where lawn or shrubs and flowers would normally be planted, there was mud when it rained and blowing dust when it was dry. Yet he had pulled himself up by his bootstraps and the future would see him serving as a brilliant educator in the Midwest. At that time he was seeking a wife.

When he went to pick up this young woman, he stepped into an apartment of squalor. She had come from a lovely home, and perhaps the condition there was temporary, but suddenly he recalled all of the embarrassing moments when friends had come to his home and found the same condition there. That was the end. He never did invite her again. She didn’t know why.

### **The Benefits of Taking Responsibility**

The advantages of taking responsibility for one’s environment, for one’s personal appearance, and, above all, for one’s integrity are

obvious. Let us reiterate the benefits that come when we decide what we want.

**The first benefit is this:** We function within an environment of freedom. It is our Heavenly Father's way. Free agency is what we fought that great war for in the life before this one. We had become convinced that the ways of Jesus Christ were right, and we were willing to take all the risks necessary to come to this earth and live out our appointed time. George Bernard Shaw once stated, "Liberty means responsibility" (*Maxims for Revolutionists*). That is why most men dread it. That is why so many people living today have capitulated and given up all that matters. Suddenly they are not directing their own lives any more.

I was in a conversation with a businessman from the East when I was thirty years old. He said, "Tell me about your friends."

I said, "Well, most of them have died."

He said, "Most of your friends have died? You are only thirty."

I answered, "Well, their hearts are still beating, and there would be some other vital signs. I'm sure they would have blood pressure. Food is being digested, but I don't think they have had a new thought since high school."

We talked about this condition and recognized that this group of acquaintances had opted to surrender. Brothers and sisters, that is something we cannot do. There is a great advantage in taking responsibility. We live in an environment of freedom if we will but capitalize on it.

**The second benefit:** We become more powerful people—we become more interesting people. When those around you know that you have made some of those critical decisions, you will often find, after dinner or as you walk across campus, someone scurrying up to you wanting to know how you feel about this or that. He has observed that you have direction in your life. You have made some of those decisions and he wants to know why.

It has been said a strong position of responsibility will usually show a man to be far

stronger than it was imagined he was. Of course that is true. When we start making those decisions, we are just more exciting people. What a lovely way to live.

I remember a young woman from Idaho Falls. She was starting her college life and had immediately captured the interest of at least 2,365 young men on campus. It seemed everyone wanted to date her. She was not a campus queen. In fact, she had not been blessed with physical beauty. But, for some reason, every time we were with her, we were a little bit better. She knew exactly what she wanted and which direction she was going. I asked a friend of mine about her and he said, "Well, there will come a time when she will stop dating eight or nine nights a week and she will settle down. She will select the finest man there is and they will live happily ever after."

That is exactly what happened. She was a young woman who knew what would lead to her happiness and what would lead to the happiness of others. It was a rich blending of both. I saw her in the airport a month or so ago. She was saying good-bye to a son going on a mission. She was still the same wonderful woman. Her life had unfolded in a predetermined way because it had been predesigned. Those of us in the kingdom of God have that great advantage because we know what is right.

**Third:** Trust comes from taking personal responsibility. Trust fosters satisfactory relationships more than any other single characteristic. The great Booker T. Washington said, "Few things help an individual more than to place responsibility upon him and to let him know that you trust him." We understand why we want to behave differently when someone trusts us. But why do they trust us? Because we have already made the decisions that lead to trust.

**Fourth:** Responsibility breeds opportunities. Don't we all act upon that fact? All of us seem to be given a wealth of opportunities. Each day at dawn we have a myriad of choices

and places to go and things to do and ideas to think about and friendships to generate if we accept personal responsibility.

When I was a member of a social fraternity at the University of Utah, I knew a young man, several years older, by the name of Bill. After a hard day in the classroom and after studying all afternoon because he had decided that he wanted good grades and didn't want to be reliant upon a family or father at home, he would go downtown to a restaurant, scrape gum from the tables, clean the restrooms, and scrub places that were not pleasant. During those experiences, as he was assuming self-responsibility, he was also deciding that the Marriott Corporation should go into the hotel business and the theme park business. He was unwilling to let those at home in Washington provide what he needed to slip comfortably through college—no, not Bill. As you know, he has been listed as one of the most effective business executives in the world. But I remember Bill Marriott when he was scraping gum and cleaning bathroom floors.

Taking responsibility is simply integrity in action. Can you imagine—and I'm speaking to you directly—anything as exciting as being young, being a member of our Savior's kingdom, and living in this world of opportunity right now? There just isn't anything as exciting. Those negative, pathetic people who think the world is going the wrong direction in a hand basket are those who have not thought great thoughts, those who have not been eager to accept personal responsibility.

**Fifth:** Assuming personal responsibility is anti-Satan and pro-God. I testify to you that Satan becomes anxious when we employ the eternal principle of self-determination. That means we cannot respond to the peer pressures about us—and listen carefully—that we are to turn off MTV when there are pictures or sounds there that destroy the person we can become. Why, in heaven's name, should students and administrators ever be at odds with

one another if both have the same goal of being personally responsible? There is a lot to think of there.

### **Utilizing Free Agency**

How grateful we all should be that our loving Heavenly Father has placed us in a world where we can decide what we want. It was that characteristic that initially made this country great. It is also that characteristic that separates us as a group of religionists from those who believe in control.

Within each of us is a myriad of different potentials. Making decisions ourselves leads to actions that direct us toward eternal life. One looks with dismay at the outcome had Joseph Smith settled down on a small piece of rocky farmland, satisfied with periodically reading the scriptures and attending whatever church was nearby.

One looks with dismay upon the result had Douglas MacArthur gone to Texas to sell corn seed or farm equipment instead of knowing there were battles to fight and wars to win. One looks with dismay had George Washington gone to London for the comfort of the world's social whirl, living there part-time and returning to America only to oversee his plantation. But, of course, he did not do that. He saw beyond the present comforts and realized the importance of freedom. Because of that, we have this land today.

One looks with dismay had President Spencer W. Kimball stayed in a little Arizona farm town, peaceful as it was, working at the bank instead of standing and facing a flood that had all but destroyed his valley and using the kingdom of God to bless those people because he knew what was the right thing to do. He didn't have to do that. He made the decision to do so. Because of that, we will all say in the years to come, "We were there when President Kimball was our prophet." What a marvelous man he is. Incidentally, I bring you greetings from our prophet leader. He is doing

a little better; we just wish he were doing even better than that.

### **Accepting Responsibility**

In conclusion, let me just reiterate a couple of the tools we need to use if we are to accept personal responsibility for our actions and our lives. There is not a better time for apron-string cutting than now, when you can look to your parents and those who have brought you to this point with great gratitude, knowing that you must now walk some of those lonely paths.

**First:** Be courageous. For some reason, too many today lack the courage we need to have—the courage to say no in the backseat of an automobile, the courage to sometimes study that extra hour or two or three each day, to accomplish that which will bring pride.

**Second:** As we make these personal decisions, taking responsibility for our lives, may we follow God's plan. We have the gospel of Jesus Christ. What better road map could be printed? I see in my mind's eye the Savior, as reported by John the Beloved, standing there pleading with the people of that day saying, "Look, all that you've seen me do I've seen the

Father do. All that I have taught are things he has already taught me." The Savior was willing to take that type of responsibility—a willingness born of the eternal knowledge that Heavenly Father's love was so great that his ideas would always lead us properly.

**Third:** As we make these decisions, let us always build, help, protect, and heal others. Let us be those who deliver our dates on their doorsteps a little better persons than when we said hello at an earlier hour that evening. Let us, as we take a particular class in school, make sure that we penetrate the obvious and begin to understand the theories of that particular discipline. Let's also make sure that if someone needs our help and guidance we have an hour or two each day to provide for them some of the support so often needed.

**Fourth:** Do not—I repeat, do not—ever allow others to make for you life's vital decisions. They are yours.

May we stand as loving sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father, taking responsibility for the decisions that will lead us back to him. This I humbly pray, in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.