

“Intentional Gospel Living” and “Teach Me All That I Must Be”



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Devotional
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Sister Tanner:

I am grateful to be with you in this historic, beautiful setting. I feel great love for each of you students and the whole University ohana. Today I will briefly focus with you on the idea or word “intentional.”

This is a word that President Russell M. Nelson seems to like to both use and practice. It is not found in the scriptures that I know of, but there are words and phrases with similar meanings like “with real intent” or “with full purpose of heart” or even “with all your heart, mind, and strength.” All of these words mean that you work towards something with design, purpose, intention or determination. Having a goal or an aim or a plan is the foundation. The plan provides something on which we can focus our hearts and minds.

Let me illustrate the importance of having a plan by telling two grandchildren stories. Our grandson Joshua is the oldest child in his family. When his baby sister was born, I was there to help. Each morning bright and early, 2-year-old Joshua would come running out of his room asking, “What is the plan today, Mommy?” Every day he had the same question, wanting to know what to expect for that day. Just recently I spent some time at his home. He continues to be a delight to be around as a 17-year-old now. The first thing I would hear from him each morning was “Hey Mom, what’s the plan today?” Over all these years, not much had changed. He still had the same important question.

At Christmas time, our 6-year-old granddaughter Carlie visited us. She was up early every morning snuggling in a cozy chair while I got ready. And her first question to me each day was, “What is the plan for today, Grandma?” On that first morning, 3 days before Christmas, I told her that we had exciting activities planned for each day. Then I told her about all of our visitors and parties and cousin time and about all of the work we would need to do to make it happen. Her eyes sparkled with excitement. And she ran with purpose to get dressed so she could help, and to tell her mommy the fun plan.

Why is having and knowing what the plan is so important that Joshua and Carlie would ask about it every single day -- and for Joshua for over 15 years? A plan gives guidance to our lives. It allows us to see the whole or at least the larger picture. It gives us a feeling of security, of excitement or happiness. Ultimately, it gives us purpose and focus.

Heavenly Father has provided a great plan for us, for all of those reasons. Every day in my prayers, I praise Him for this Plan of Happiness and for my knowledge of it, and for His son Jesus Christ who came to earth to fulfill that Plan. I find great security in knowing my eternal purpose here, in having a sense of the whole picture. It guides my actions. My choices become very intentional, purposeful, and deliberate.

We live in an era that will require from us very intentional efforts in teaching, learning, and living the Gospel, and striving to become like our Savior, Jesus Christ. Our prophet President Russell M. Nelson said,

“I am optimistic about the future. It will be filled with opportunities for each of us to progress, contribute, and take the gospel to every corner of the earth. But I am also not naïve about the days ahead. We live in a world that is complex and increasingly contentious.” (Ensign, May 2018, p. 96)

Our living prophet/president is intentional about becoming like the Savior. And he is asking us to also be purposeful in this effort. We feel his urgency to have us live the gospel with all of hearts, minds and strength. This is not a time to be casual, to waffle, to be lazy, to let things just happen as they may. This is the time to gather Israel, to prepare the world for Christ’s coming. He is telling us to live the gospel more intentionally.

“My beloved brothers and sisters, I plead with you to increase your spiritual capacity to receive revelation. . . Choose to do the spiritual work required to enjoy the gift of the Holy Ghost and hear the voice of the spirit more frequently and more clearly.”

He is telling us to intentionally make our homes into Gospel Training Centers.

“. . . each family [should] conscientiously and carefully transform their home into a sanctuary of faith. . . remodel your home into a center of Gospel learning. . .”

He is telling us to study the scriptures with purpose.

“Read the Book of Mormon between now and the end of the year. . . If you will accept this invitation with full purpose of heart, the Lord will help you find a way to achieve it.”

He is telling us to teach of Christ intentionally.

“Be intentional about talking of Christ, rejoicing in Christ, and preaching of Christ with your families and friends.”

Just a brief story about this. Last fall I asked each of our married children to find ways to strengthen their families, and I gave them some materials and talks about families that they could use in their family home evenings. But one of my daughters came to me shortly thereafter and apologetically told me that she probably wouldn't be using the talks I had suggested. As she studied the recent Conference, she had felt impressed that they should focus all of their study time on Jesus Christ and becoming like Him. She was right! She was being intentional about talking, preaching and rejoicing in Christ, and she was receiving revelation for her family, as the prophet encouraged.

Our prophet has asked us to “leave the world behind as we assist in this crucial and urgent work.” We must be intentional, purposeful, and deliberate – more than ever before. As Elder D. Todd Christofferson reiterated:

“To persevere firm and steadfast in the faith of Christ requires that the Gospel of Jesus Christ penetrate one's heart and soul, meaning that the gospel becomes not just one of many influences in a person's life but the defining focus of his or her life and character.”

How can each of us be more intentional about making the gospel “the defining focus” in our lives, whether it be in our education, our Church service, our family lives, or our personal righteousness?

I encourage you to be intentional about your education. Most of you in this audience are students. You are at a gospel-centered university. This is a relatively short and unique time in your lives where you have the opportunity to learn, to prepare for a career, to develop leadership skills, to come to know more about the gospel and the temple, all in a setting infused with the spirit. I know the stories of many of you who have sacrificed everything to be here, who have spent years of preparation so you could have this opportunity. Your time here will only be as effective as you make it. Will you study, work, and serve with real intent and with full purpose of heart? If you do, you will receive many promised blessings because you are taking advantage of this experience very intentionally and purposefully.

All of us need to be intentional about teaching in our families. Recently our daughter had an unexpected occasion to teach with purpose in her home. She and her husband had been planning to talk with their 8-year-old daughter about the “facts of life,” but just had not gotten around to finding a quiet, special time to do so. But the opportunity came one night at the dinner table, while her husband was still at work, and the daughter opened the subject with a specific question. In a split second a hundred thoughts went through our daughter’s mind: “where is Brad when I need him?; should I just stall and tell her I’ll answer her later?; what simple message can I give her in front of the younger children?; and then a silent prayer: “Heavenly Father help me to teach her appropriately with the Spirit, now.” And that is what she did. She used truths and language from the Proclamation on the Family, simple explanations with each ensuing question. The littler ones drifted away as they lost interest, but this daughter felt affirmed, happy, well-taught, and willing to come back for more conversations. This comes from well prepared parents who seek to continually have the spirit, so they can call upon it at the needed moments. This is what purposeful parenting looks like.

I once asked Elder Bednar with his busy schedule how he stays close to his family and how he teaches them. He is very intentional about it. In July, when he has time off they gather together at a beach house on the East Coast of the United States. There they play together and bond with each other. He asks the adults to come with their gospel questions and their parenting concerns, so that when the little ones go to sleep the adults can discuss their questions and help one another learn and grow. He asks the children to come with a goal to be achieved in the coming year. They remember and review last year’s goals and then proceed to new ones. His time with them is short, but purposeful.

Each of you is stretched to the limit with your many responsibilities, but you must be very intentional about learning and living the gospel and if you have children, about teaching your little ones. To paraphrase President Nelson words, but using a family theme:

“In the coming days, it will not be possible for our children to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the intentional teaching of righteous parents.”

Let us be intentional teachers and intentional learners and follow Jesus Christ with full purpose of heart.

What do the scriptures promise us if we are intentional followers of Christ? If we embrace his great plan and “follow the Son with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent. . .then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost.” If we come to him with all of our hearts, he will deliver us out of bondage, heal us, and gather us. I want and need these blessings.

And what is our prophet promising us if we are intentional followers of Christ? The heavens will be opened to our minds and hearts with increased inspiration and revelation. We will feel a closeness to our Savior. Miracles will abound, and dramatic and sustained changes will occur in our families. We will be given special power from on high, and the Savior’s love will dwell with us. I want and need these blessings.

Brothers and Sisters, I praise the Lord for His purposeful plan for us. I am grateful that we have a knowledge and understanding of His love and blessings. I know we have a living prophet who is encouraging intentional preparation for His second coming to the earth. What a glorious time we live in! What wonderful opportunities are ours! I pray we might each live the Gospel and follow Jesus Christ with enthusiasm, with real intent, and with full purpose of heart, purposefully and intentionally.

President Tanner”

Aloha! Thank you, Susan, for that inspiring message. One thing you all need to know about Sister Tanner is that she lives what she preaches. She is intentional about living and teaching the gospel in all of her roles and callings. This summer, for example, she gathered our 20 grandchildren in age groups—Teens, Tweens, and Tots—and held our own family versions of Especially for Youth to bond with them and teach them the gospel. She is an amazing mother, grandmother, wife, friend, daughter, and disciple, who lives and teaches the gospel with real intent. She’s as good as she seems. Even better. And I love her.

Last fall, I was intentional about my Devotional message. It was intended to make an important difference in how you live the gospel and pursue your education here. Does anyone remember what I talked about? A few do. Maybe these slides will jog your memory. Since we learn by repetition, let me highlight a few main points.

I spoke to you about becoming disciplined disciples and about BYU-Hawaii as a Disciple Training Center—a DTC. Some of you will remember that I used a story called *The Dot and the Line* to illustrate how discipline can actually enable greater freedom, as when the line wows the dot by learning to turn himself into amazing complex shapes. His disciplined freedom shows up the undisciplined squiggle. I told you, “Don’t be a squiggle! Be a spectacularly disciplined line!”

Some may also remember that I made a fool of myself at the piano. I showed how I couldn't play because I hadn't submitted myself to the discipline of learning scales and doing finger exercises. My point was to encourage you to engage in the hard but necessary discipline of mastering fundamental academic skills, not only in music but in disciplines like math, writing, accounting, etc. Academic discipline will allow you to perform greater things and be of greater service in the Lord's kingdom.

I also admonished you to become disciplined disciples in your personal lives with respect to the Honor Code. I emphasized the spiritual disciplines of integrity, honor, and promise-keeping because these disciplines are foundational to true discipleship. I feel very strongly about this.

Today I want to deepen and expand on what it means to become a fully consecrated, devoted disciple. My focus last fall was primarily on doing. My focus today is on becoming. I have called my talk "Teach Me All That I Must Be."

When I was in Utah for Christmas, I visited my 98-year-old mother. Here we are together. She is in amazingly good health physically but is losing her memory. So when we get together nowadays we mostly sing songs, which she loves and remembers well. Among the songs we sang together over the break was "I Am a Child of God." I have been singing this song since it was first introduced to the Church. The music was written by a sister in our ward, Mildred Tanner Pettit, who tried it out on us in Primary. It originally contained the line "Teach me all that I must know to live with Him someday." At President Kimball's urging, the lyricist, Naomi W. Randall, changed this line to "Teach me all that I must do." Sister Pettit often talked about the spiritual experience of revising this line, and it is an inspired improvement.

My mom and I, however, have long felt that the change should have gone even further. So, when we joined our voices over the break to sing this beloved Primary song, mom sang out "Teach me all that I must be"! She then stopped and began to explain, with great animation, how "be" expresses what the Lord really expects of us.

But she was preaching to the choir. She no longer remembers that years ago I suggested this change in the lyrics. Why? Because just as it is not enough merely to know what is right, it is also not enough merely to do what is right; after all, hypocrites do the right thing. True disciples do the right things for the right reasons, as I would frequently remind my missionaries. (Though sometimes I was willing to settle simply for their doing the right thing.) And the right reason for righteous action is almost always the pure love of Christ. Disciples obey out of love, for they understand that God wants us not only to obey Him but to become like Him.

This is what it means to be a true disciple. That's why last fall I encouraged you to make a "to become list" rather than simply a "to do list." As I said:

“the goal of disciple training, whether here at BYU--Hawaii or in the school we call mortality, is to learn not just to act like a disciple but to become a disciple, heart and soul.”

Today I want to elaborate on this grand goal of disciple training. If my talk last fall could be seen as Disciple Training 101, this one is from the advanced course on discipleship.

I speak today to the higher purposes of disciple training, whether here at BYU–Hawaii or in mortality—objectives beyond increasing your knowledge and improving your behavior, as important as knowing and doing are. BYU–Hawaii aspires to help you become a better person. Hence, we are concerned about not only your intellect and your conduct. We have designs here on your very heart and soul, on who you are. While knowledge and action are important to our mission, becoming is most important of all.

Let me try to schematize the relationship as I see it among know, do, and be. You might imagine “know,” “do,” and “be” as concentric circles, with being or becoming as the all-embracing outer circle. In this scheme “being” encompasses the others.

Or, alternatively, you might imagine being at the center of the circles, as it lies at the core of who you truly are. In this design “being” centers the others. Either way you imagine the relationship among this trio, being or becoming constitutes the key element of the three. If this is right, the other two are usually right too. A good tree bringeth forth good fruit. (Matt. 7:17-19)

This is why the prophets so often lay such great emphasis on the heart. It is why Jeremiah speaks of the Lord’s putting the law in our inward parts (Jer. 31:33), and why Paul described the gospel as being written “not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart” (2 Cor. 3:3). It is why President Hinckley often told Sister Tanner that she needed to help the Young Women get the gospel down deep into their hearts. And it is why Jesus inveighed against hypocrisy and taught the primacy of purity of heart in the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament and the Sermon at the Temple in The Book of Mormon.

Let me illustrate the centrality of “becoming” in Jesus’s teachings by looking at these seminal sermons on discipleship. In them, Jesus tried move his followers from outward observance to inward whole-hearted embrace of righteousness; from conformity to consecration; from knowing and doing to becoming. Anyone who walks the path of discipleship must traverse these trajectories, which Jesus lays out so memorably in the Sermon on the Mount and its corollary the Sermon at the Temple. These discourses constitute Christ’s great manuals of Christian discipleship

Jesus frames his message as fulfilling the Mosaic law: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets. I am not come to destroy but to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17; 3 Ne. 12:17). And he declares himself to be the prophet of whom Moses spoke when he said: “The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet . . . like unto me” (3 Ne. 20:23; see Deut. 18:15). Jesus thus presents his sermons as a commentary on the Mosaic law and himself as a sort of new Moses. While Moses delivers the law from Mount Sinai, Jesus delivers the gospel from the Mount of Beatitudes. While Moses prefaces the Mosaic law with the Ten Commandments, Jesus announces the new order with the Beatitudes. While the Mosaic law stresses outward performance, Jesus emphasizes inward purity. As the new lawgiver, Christ extends the Mosaic law deeply into the heart.

The accent in the Decalogue falls on doing: especially on what we should not do: Thou shalt not kill, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, covet, etc. The accent in the Beatitudes falls on becoming, especially on what and who we should become: humble, meek, merciful, pure in heart, etc. The Beatitudes capture the gospel’s emphasis on inwardness and purity of heart. As the new Moses, Jesus reminds his disciples that before God our motives are always at issue. The Lord looketh not on the outward appearance but on the heart (see 1 Sam 16:7).

Jesus explicitly and repeatedly compares his teachings to Moses’s: “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time,” is a repeated refrain, followed by citing one of the Ten Commandments or other Mosaic teaching from Deuteronomy: thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not foreswear thyself; an eye for an eye; etc. “But I say unto you,” Jesus continues, casting himself as the new lawgiver or Moses and reminding his followers that God cares about the sources of sin in the heart and not just their expression in our behavior. The higher law of gospel will require not less but more of disciples. Refraining from sinning is essential but not enough. As disciples we must seek to overcome anger and lust; we must love even our enemies. And so forth. The Lord wants to change who we are, not just what we do. Hence his eye is ever upon our hearts.

Jesus explains that becoming a disciple requires that we lay the sacrifice of a broken heart and contrite spirit on the altar (3 Ne. 9:19-20). And as Elder Neal A. Maxwell observed, this means we must lay the natural man in ourselves on the altar:

“So it is that real, personal sacrifice never was placing an animal on the altar. Instead, it is a willingness to put the animal in us upon the altar and letting it be consumed! Such is the “sacrifice unto the Lord . . . of a broken heart and a contrite spirit” (D&C 59:8). Neal A. Maxwell, “Deny Yourselves of All Ungodliness” (Apr. 1995)

In the new dispensation that Jesus ushers in, the focus is consistently on the heart; which is to say on who we truly are. The great sin in these sermons is hypocrisy, which may be defined as doing one thing but being another. Do we give alms for the glory of men? Do we pray to be admired of others? Do we fast so others will think us pious? Over and over again, Jesus calls attention to the danger of hypocrisy. Over and over again, the Lord puts pressure on the question, Where is your heart? For “where your treasure, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21; 3 Ne. 13:21).

Thus, the accent in Christ’s manual of discipleship falls consistently on being and becoming. Why? Because the ultimate aim of discipleship is to become like him, a new man and woman in Christ. As Jesus says to the Nephites: “Old things are done away, and all things have become new.” Including the heart of every true disciple! “Therefore, I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Ne 12:47-48).

Now my dear brothers and sisters, can you see how this applies to your education in disciplined discipleship here, in this DTC? We want you to do the right things, but for the right reasons, so you will become a better disciple.

·Do we want you to obey the Honor Code? Yes! But more than this, we want you to internalize the principles of modesty and integrity in the Honor Code rather than just grudgingly conform to its rules.

·Do we want you to study hard so you get good grades? Yes! But more than this we want you to truly learn, no matter what grades you receive, and come to love learning so that you will become a life-long learner.

·Do we want you to attend Church and the temple while you are a student here? Yes! But more than this we want you to truly worship on Sunday and in the temple. As important as it is to go through the temple, it is more important to have the temple go through you.

In all these ways and more, we want you to become a more devout disciple here, not just to do well in school and refrain from breaking the rules. This requires not less but more of you, just as Jesus taught his followers that their righteousness needed to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20).

Can you also see how the principle of becoming a true disciple also applies to the direction the Prophet is trying to take the Church? It underlies the move from lower law, once-a-month Visiting and Home Teaching to higher law, Christ-like Ministering. It underlies the renewed emphasis on deep and genuine Sabbath worship, on meaningful covenant making in the Sacrament, and on personal responsibility for gospel learning and living.

These and other changes and renewed emphases are all intended to help members of Christ's church become more fully converted rather than merely go through the motions of Church membership. They are intended to move us along the path of true discipleship, which is the covenant path that leads from obedience to consecration.

I have seen missionaries traverse this path in the mission field. Many start their missions far from being truly consecrated and often struggling merely to be obedient—some with dogged determination to obey and others kicking against the pricks and managing only grudging compliance. A few, sadly, stay at this level for their whole mission, fighting against mission rules, seeing how close they can come to the line, and holding back from being fully in. Such missionaries never know the joy of consecration that comes to those who offer their whole souls to the Lord, holding nothing back, as is so beautifully described by Omni in his invitation to “come unto Christ”: “Yea come unto him, and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him . . . and as the Lord liveth ye will be saved” (Omni 1:26).

Consecrated disciples who offer their whole souls to Christ will be saved because salvation is not simply an external reward that happens to us but the consequence of who and whose we are and have become through Christ. As Dallin H. Oaks taught:

“the Final Judgment is not just an evaluation of a sum total of good and evil acts—what we have done. It is an acknowledgment of the final effect of our acts and thoughts—what we have become. It is not enough for anyone just to go through the motions. The commandments, ordinances, and covenants of the gospel are not a list of deposits required to be made in some heavenly account. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a plan that shows us how to become what our Heavenly Father desires us to become.” (Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” Oct. 2000)

In this memorable talk, Elder Oaks forcibly reminded the Church of “the challenge to become.” Become what? Become like Christ so that “when he shall appear we shall be like him” (Moro. 7:48; 1 Jn. 3:2). This requires educating our desires so that, through the Atonement of Christ, we come to desire what he desires and love what he loves. It requires self-discipline and sanctification—or, as I have said before, grit and grace.

Don't be discouraged if you are not there yet. None of us is. Becoming perfected in and through Christ involves a process of time, likely a very long time, stretching into eternity. Nevertheless, we have this promise: that those who are quickened by a portion of Celestial glory ultimately will receive a fullness (D&C 88:29).

So, in conclusion: My mother is right. The purpose of the gospel is to “teach us all that we must be to live with him someday.” It is not enough only to know or to do, as important as these are. We must become—become like Christ. How? We become by coming unto Christ and being perfected in him. This entails both denying ourselves of all ungodliness and sin, as Moses taught, and by loving God with all our might, mind, heart, and strength, as Jesus taught. Thus, by the grace of God, we become “perfected in Christ” as his true disciples.

May you and I strive to learn here, in this Disciple Training Center and throughout all our lives, all that we must be to live with him someday.

In the name of Jesus Christ, our master, Amen.