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Truth Endures

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I thank my Heavenly Father for the privilege of being with you tonight. I'm grateful for Elder Kim B. Clark and Brother Chad H Webb. I admire all those who have been mentioned this evening or are listed in the printed program. I have a deep appreciation for the Church Educational System, for seminaries and institutes. I have deep admiration for all who serve—the associates, the volunteers, all who contribute. The service you provide is supremely important and valuable to Church members, especially to each rising generation, and I am grateful to you.

I would like to speak to you this evening about truth. The Church Educational System is dedicated to teaching and inculcating truth, especially those most salient and fundamental truths that are the underpinnings of eternal life. It has always been important not only to teach but to defend truth, and in our time that need seems to be growing.

We all remember the conversation in John when Jesus was arraigned before Pilate and declared that He had come into the world to “bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth,” Jesus said, “heareth my voice.”¹ Pilate, sounding very much the cynic, responded, “What is truth?”² It was apparently a rhetorical question. He may not have believed that truth exists, or perhaps after a life of political intrigue, he despaired of ever getting at what is really true. Nevertheless, his question is a good one, one we should think about.

In His magnificent intercessory prayer at the Last Supper, the Lord attested that the word of the Father is truth.³ He declared that the record or witness of the Holy Spirit is true, and that “the truth abideth forever and ever.”⁴ Both the Father and the Son are declared to be “full of grace and truth.”⁵ By revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Savior gave perhaps the most concise definition of truth possible: “Truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come.”⁶

While that definition is straightforward, the implication is that without divine assistance, mortal man’s grasp of truth cannot be very expansive. BYU emeritus professor Chauncey C. Riddle explained it this way:

No mortal being can have any but a small shred of the truth about how things are, and were, and will be. And since we understand by relationships, we as mortals cannot comprehend that shred [of truth] we do know in its totality because the shred has its full significance only when related to everything else and the past, [present] and future of everything else.

Truth then is a thing grasped completely only by the gods, those who are omniscient and who see and know all things past, present and future.⁷

Professor Riddle goes on to note:

To rescue humanity from this limited ability to discern truth, our Father has given us our Savior, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost. Our Savior gives to all men and women born into this world the Light of Christ, by which they can tell good from evil. . . . If a person receives and loves the Light of Christ, and learns to use it habitually in discerning good from evil, he or she will be ready to receive the witness of the Holy Ghost. . . . A person with this gift [of the Holy Ghost] is entitled to the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. Any person who has that constant companionship has access to all truth. “And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things [Moroni 10:5].”⁸

The Savior confirmed this in a statement at the Last Supper: “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth.”⁹ To

Joseph Smith, He added, “He that keepeth [my] commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things.”¹⁰

The first thing we should understand about truth, then, is that a knowledge of truth in any significant measure requires divine assistance, either through the Light of Christ or by the aid of the Holy Ghost. Given our limited mortal capacity and resources, if we are unaided by revelation, we simply cannot achieve a comprehensive knowledge of things as they were, are, and will be, and how any one thing relates to how everything else was, is, or will be.

Nevertheless, the Lord counseled the Prophet Joseph Smith to “study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people.”¹¹ And He expands that counsel to all of us, “seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom [or we might say “truth”]; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”¹² And this we ought to do, He says, “diligently.”¹³ We must give it our best effort, and that best effort includes exercising faith—actively asking, seeking, and knocking to have opened to us the truth and light that come from God.¹⁴ This is “deep learning,” as Elder Kim Clark has described it tonight.

I believe that most, if not all, of the truth we are able to discover comes through divine help, whether we recognize it or not. Writing about the Light of Christ or Spirit of Christ, President Boyd K. Packer noted: “The Spirit of Christ can enlighten the inventor, the scientist, the painter, the sculptor, the composer, the performer, the architect, the author to produce great, even inspired things for the blessing and good of all mankind. This Spirit can prompt the farmer in his field and the fisherman on his boat. It can inspire the teacher in the classroom, the missionary in presenting his discussion. It can inspire the student who listens. And of enormous importance, it can inspire husband and wife, and father and mother.”¹⁵

We, of all people, should be humble and realistic enough to acknowledge that not only does salvation come by grace “after all we can do,” but our grasp of truth similarly comes by grace “after all we can do.”¹⁶ “For the word of the Lord is truth, and whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ.”¹⁷

I turn now to the Savior’s declaration, “the truth abideth forever and ever.”¹⁸ In section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord declares, “All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence.”¹⁹ I take this to mean that all truth, including the truth that governs our present sphere, exists

independent and apart. It is unaffected by my preference or your opinion. It stands independent of any effort to control or change it. It cannot be lobbied or influenced in any way. It is a fixed reality.

The Savior said that without this fixed reality of truth, “there is no existence.”²⁰ I believe this is what Lehi had in mind when he taught:

If ye shall say there is no law [law used here is a synonym of truth—truth that is “independent in that sphere in which God has placed it”], ye shall also say there is no sin [sin being disobedience to law]. If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness [righteousness being obedience to law; in other words, without law or truth there is nothing to obey or disobey]. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness [happiness being the result of righteousness]. And if there be no righteousness nor happiness there be no punishment nor misery [punishment and misery being the consequence of sin]. And if these things are not there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation of things, neither to act nor to be acted upon; wherefore, all things must have vanished away.²¹

By these things, then, we know that truth exists, that it represents a fixed and immutable reality, that unaided, the quantity of truth that mortals can discern is relatively small, that we depend on the help of divine revelation to learn “the truth of all things,”²² and that we and God depend on truth to act and create, “otherwise there is no existence.”²³ Elsewhere we also learn that truth does not conflict with truth, but that indeed all truth may be circumscribed into one great whole.

Now, where do we find ourselves in today’s world as we seek to teach and affirm truth, especially spiritual truth?

In much of the world, relativist thinking has become a dominant philosophy. By relativism I mean the view that ethical or moral truths are relative, that they depend on the attitudes and feelings of those who hold them, and that no one can judge the validity of someone else’s “truth.” You hear a lot of talk these days about “my truth” and “his truth” or “her truth.” This kind of thinking is described by columnist David Brooks, reviewing the book *Lost in Transition* by Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith and others. Brooks reports:

The default position, which most of [Smith’s interviewees] came back to again and again, is that moral choices are just a matter of individual taste. “It’s personal,” the respondents typically said. “It’s up to the individual. Who am I to say?”

Rejecting blind deference to authority, many of the young people have gone off to the other extreme: “I would do what I thought made me happy or how I felt. I have no other way of knowing what to do but how I internally feel.”

Many were quick to talk about their moral feelings but hesitant to link these feelings to any broader thinking about a shared moral framework or obligation. As one put it, “I mean, I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it. But different people feel different ways, so I couldn’t speak on behalf of anyone else as to what’s right and wrong.”²⁴

I think you would agree that the philosophy of moral relativism has made great inroads in our time. “Not judging” has become an almost unchallengeable standard for conversation and behavior. But in reality, we all make judgments about what is right and wrong, and not just for ourselves, but for the people and the society around us. Laws and systems of law, even political systems, are the embodiment of moral values and perceived truths. In a pluralistic society, we may debate what values should be enshrined in laws or regulations and what is right or wrong or true, but in the end, on any given issue, someone’s view, or some group’s view, of truth prevails and everyone becomes bound by it.

Moral relativism just doesn’t work if there is to be order and justice in society. Can murder be wrong for most but right for some? Is a thief entitled to keep what he steals and continue stealing because he believes robbery is right for him, especially since he grew up in an underprivileged circumstance? Or taking note of something very much in the news today, is a man entitled to sexually harass a woman because he finds it consistent with his personal sense of right and wrong?

“Well,” one might say, “you are talking about things that are generally accepted as wrong. There are some self-existing values that inhere in human existence that are the basis for laws against murder, rape, theft, and other actions that injure people or interfere with their legitimate pursuit of happiness. These are essential and universal human rights that negate any individual right to the contrary. It is only beyond these acknowledged human rights that moral relativism applies, where each individual may define for himself or herself what is right or wrong.” But this line of reasoning makes the point that there are in fact moral absolutes, whether you call them universal human rights or something else. At least some truths and moral concepts exist apart from personal whim or preference. The only debate, really, is what they are and how far they extend.

Our calling, and it is ever more urgent in this environment, is to teach the truth of moral concepts: what they are and how far they extend. We prize truth on any subject from any source, but eternal truth, especially as it bears on the meaning and the purpose and the conduct of life, we must obtain

from God. Moral relativists generally see no role or relevance for God in this discussion and typically doubt that He even exists. It would be most inconvenient for them if He does exist, and even more so if He speaks to man. One can only think about truth as relative if God is not around.

Pew Research recently reported that for the first time, a majority of Americans (56 percent) say it is not necessary to have religious belief to be a good person. “God is not a prerequisite for good values and morality,” said Greg Smith, Pew’s associate director of research, in his post about the findings.²⁵

I’m sure we would agree that people who are atheists or who otherwise have no professed religion or religious belief can be, and most often are, good and upright people. But we would not agree that this happens without God. As noted earlier, whether someone likes it or not, believes it or not, or is even aware of it or not, he or she is imbued with the Light of Christ and therefore possesses a common sense of right and wrong that we sometimes call conscience. The Savior said, “I am the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.”²⁶ We also read: “And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit.”²⁷

President Boyd K. Packer, in the article I quoted earlier, taught: “Every man, woman, and child of every nation, creed, or color—everyone, no matter where they live or what they believe or what they do—has within them the imperishable Light of Christ. In this respect, all men are created equally. The Light of Christ in everyone is a testimony that God is no respecter of persons (see D&C 1:35). He treats everyone equally in that endowment with the Light of Christ.”²⁸

The Light of Christ extant in every mortal is what Lehi had in mind when he declared, “And men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil. . . . And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves.”²⁹ Mormon taught:

For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God.

But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil; for after this manner doth the devil work, for he persuadeth no man to

do good, no, not one; neither do his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him. . . .

Search diligently in the light of Christ that ye may know good from evil; and if ye will lay hold upon every good thing, and condemn it not, ye certainly will be a child of Christ.³⁰

Moral relativism does real harm as it acts to diminish conscience. If acknowledged and followed, conscience will lead to ever greater light and truth. But ignoring or suppressing conscience obviously leads one away from light and truth and into denial, error, and regret. Pretending there is no fixed, objective truth is nothing more than an attempt to evade responsibility and accountability. This is not a recipe for happiness.

Twenty years ago, J. Budziszewski, a professor of government and philosophy at the University of Texas, Austin, wrote an interesting piece for the Catholic journal *First Things* titled “The Revenge of Conscience.” He spoke of conscience as part of natural law, “a law written in the heart of every human being.” We would, of course, describe it as the Light of Christ. In any case, his observations about the attempts to squelch conscience are insightful.

He wrote that “our knowledge of the core principles [such as those embodied in the Ten Commandments] is ineffaceable. These are the laws we can’t not know.”³¹ Moral *relativism* denies that these core principles exist, or if they do, denies they are right for all. Moral *realism* argues that we don’t really know the truth, but we honestly search for it and do the best we can, trying to see on a foggy night, as it were. Budziszewski declares, “We do know better; we are not doing the best we can. . . . By and large we do know right from wrong, but wish we didn’t. We only make believe we are searching for truth—so that we can do wrong, condone wrong, or suppress our remorse for having done wrong in the past. . . . [O]ur decline is owed not to moral ignorance but to moral suppression. We aren’t untutored, but in ‘denial.’ We don’t lack moral knowledge; we hold it down.”³²

What Alma described to his son Corianton as “remorse of conscience”³³ is real, and Budziszewski points out that attempts to suppress conscience or relieve the remorse, short of repentance, do not succeed in the end. We see it in people pretending that what they know to be wrong is not wrong. They may intentionally repeat a sin again and again in an attempt to drown out the voice of conscience. Some may pursue perpetual distraction by immersing themselves in social media, video games, or constant music in their ears to avoid any quiet moment when conscience might speak. We see it in rationalizations to which there seems to be no end, either in number or creativity.

Budziszewski cites this one, “I tell myself that sex [outside of marriage] is okay because I am going to marry my partner, because I want my partner to marry me, or because I have to find out if we could be happy married, . . . [or] ‘we don’t need promises because we’re in love.’ The implication, of course, is that those who do [want or] need promises love impurely.”³⁴

Beyond pretending, distracting, and rationalizing, people may try to get others to participate in the guilty act as a way of justifying themselves. They “don’t sin privately; they recruit.”³⁵ We could say that Satan is the master recruiter, “for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.”³⁶ Most troubling are those who insist that “society must be transformed so that it no longer stands in awful judgment. So it is that they change the laws, infiltrate the schools, and create intrusive social-welfare bureaucracies.”³⁷ Well did Isaiah warn, “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!”³⁸

Thus, Budziszewski concludes, it is our efforts to suppress the powerful forces of conscience and rationalize guilt that propels society ever deeper into the moral abyss.³⁹ I would add it also accounts for the anger that increasingly erupts in any attempted discussion that implicates societal standards and norms.

Speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus said: “And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.”⁴⁰

Attempts to repress conscience are not only futile, but if people understood things in their true light, no one would ever want to try. I mentioned near the beginning what Lehi taught about trying to escape punishment and misery by denying the reality of sin—“if ye shall say there is no law, ye shall . . . say there is no sin.”⁴¹ If we could erase the law, or truth, as those fighting against conscience are trying to do, we could indeed get rid of guilt or punishment or misery. But remember, as Lehi cautioned, without the law there would be no upside to our existence either. We would erase the possibility of righteousness and happiness. We would erase creation and existence. Obviously, the idea of erasing or eliminating truth is nonsense, but there is a way to eliminate misery while preserving the opportunity for happiness. It

is called the doctrine or gospel of Christ—faith in Christ, repentance, and baptism, both of water and of the Spirit.⁴²

We must help our students, in the Savior’s term, “do truth,”⁴³—that is, wholeheartedly embrace the Light of Christ that is in them and welcome the added light and truth that come through the Holy Ghost. Resisting, rationalizing, and pretending will not do. Only repentance and obedience to truth can deliver the “authenticity” many covet. Only repentance and obedience to truth can preserve and enlarge our happiness and freedom.

Early in my legal career, I saw up close the tragic fruits of ignoring conscience. I was the law clerk to US District Court Judge John J. Sirica in Washington D.C. The national scandal known as Watergate began shortly before my clerkship started, and the court proceedings related to Watergate occupied Judge Sirica’s time, and therefore my time, almost entirely for the next nearly two and a half years. Without rehearsing the details, I will simply say that in 1972 operatives from President Richard Nixon’s re-election campaign, the Committee to Re-elect the President, using break-ins and eavesdropping, tried to steal information from the Democratic National Committee. Arrests were made, and an effort began almost immediately to hide any connection of these illegal activities to President Nixon’s campaign or any White House official. This cover-up constituted a criminal obstruction of justice and it grew to include even President Nixon.

It seemed to me that there were many points over the next two years before he resigned when Nixon, with an awakened conscience, could have called a halt, saying, “This is not right, we will not continue, let the chips fall where they may,” and he might well have outlived the political embarrassment and the inevitable criticism and finished his term. But he never did say stop. Instead, he got deeper into the cover-up conspiracy himself. The low point for me was when Judge Sirica and I listened to a recording of a conversation that took place on March 21, 1973, between the president and White House legal counsel, John Dean, in the Oval Office.

Dean had been managing the cover-up within the White House, and he felt it was beginning to unravel. Now he had come to ask Nixon for direction. In this recorded conversation, Dean laid out what had been done during the preceding several months, including arranging for money to be delivered to the families of those who had pleaded guilty to the Watergate break-in. The money was given to buy their silence regarding higher-ups at the Committee to Re-elect the President who had planned and ordered the break-in, but now

they were threatening to talk because the money for their families was not forthcoming or was not as much as they felt had been promised.

Judge Sirica and I were shocked as we heard Nixon calmly ask, “How much money would it take?” By his tone of voice, Dean himself seemed surprised at this response, and with what felt like a number plucked out of the air he answered, “A million dollars.” Nixon responded that it would be no problem to raise that amount, but he worried about how it could be distributed without being traced. The judge and I couldn’t believe—we didn’t want to believe—what we were hearing, and he passed me a note suggesting we rewind the tape and listen again. We finished listening to the conversation and then, without saying much to each other, put the tape away and went home early. Even now, I remember the sense of disillusionment and sadness. This was some months before Nixon’s resignation, but we knew then that the president would be impeached if he did not resign first.

I wondered at the time, and have since, why Nixon allowed this scandal to grow and fester. I still feel surprise that over time his conscience could become sufficiently numbed that even the attempted blackmail of the president of the United States by the Watergate burglars did not arouse any indignation in him. The life lesson I took away from this experience was that my hope for avoiding the possibility of a similar catastrophe in my own life lay in never making an exception—always and invariably submitting to the dictates of conscience. Putting one’s integrity on hold, even for seemingly small acts in seemingly small matters, places one in danger of eventually losing the benefit and protection of conscience altogether. I’m sure that some have “gotten away with it,” in the sense that they acted dishonestly or illegally in business or professional or political life and have never been made to account (at least in this life). But a weak conscience, and certainly a numbed conscience, opens the door for “Watergates,” be they large or small, collective or personal—disasters that can hurt and destroy both the guilty and the innocent.

John records the Savior’s powerful promise “to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”⁴⁴ Knowing and following the truth most assuredly does make us free—first free from the bondage of ignorance and sin,⁴⁵ and then free to pursue every good thing until we receive the Father’s kingdom and all that He can give.⁴⁶ Knowing that Jesus is Himself “the way, the truth, and the life,”⁴⁷ perhaps the most significant meaning of the truth making us free is that by His grace, He frees us from death and hell.⁴⁸

The Lord declared, “Light and truth forsake that evil one [ending the bondage of sin]. . . . [But] that wicked one cometh and taketh away light and truth, through disobedience, from the children of men, and because of the tradition of their fathers.”⁴⁹

We have in the Book of Mormon a profound example of the evil one taking away light and truth through false traditions and disobedience. About a century and a half before the coming of Christ, the Lamanite people are described as burdened by false traditions and knowing “nothing concerning the Lord.”⁵⁰ It was only when the sons of Mosiah undertook their remarkable mission that any substantial number of Lamanites heard the plan of salvation and learned the truth.⁵¹

For King Lamoni, the joy of coming out of the darkness of falsehood into the marvelous light of truth overcame him. “And the light which did light up his mind, which was the light of the glory of God, . . . had infused such joy into his soul, the cloud of darkness having been dispelled, and that the light of everlasting life was lit up in his soul, yea, . . . this had overcome his natural frame, and he was carried away in God.”⁵²

There really are only two options. One is to pursue truth by heeding the words of Christ—“He that keepeth his commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things.”⁵³ The other is to be taken in by the adversary and attempt the impossible—to find happiness in his fictions. One cannot succeed in life here or hereafter by ignoring the reality of truth, but some, actually a lot of people, try it—it just looks so much easier than repenting. But only repentance and obedience to the truth of God free us from a fantasy world that is destined to fail, “and great [shall be] the fall of it.”⁵⁴

The core truths, the central realities of our existence, that we must teach and reteach with pure conviction and all the power God gives us are these:⁵⁵

1. God, our Heavenly Father, lives, the only true and living God.
2. Jesus Christ is the Only Begotten Son of God.
3. Jesus Christ came to earth to redeem His people; He suffered and died to atone for their sins.
4. He rose again from the dead, bringing to pass the Resurrection.
5. All will stand before Him to be judged at the last and judgment day, according to their works.

May we love and live by these truths. I bear solemn witness that they are truth. May we actively and enthusiastically seek, teach, and live by truth, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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Notes

1. John 18:37.
2. John 18:38.
3. See John 17:17.
4. D&C 1:39.
5. 2 Nephi 2:6; D&C 66:12; Moses 1:6.
6. D&C 93:24.
7. Chauncey C. Riddle, *Think Independently* (Provo, UT: Rescate Publishing, 2009), 132–33.
8. Riddle, *Think Independently* 133–34.
9. John 16:13.
10. D&C 93:28.
11. D&C 90:15.
12. D&C 88:118.
13. See D&C 88:118.
14. See Matthew 7:7; see also D&C 88:63.
15. Boyd K. Packer, “The Light of Christ,” *Ensign*, April 2005, 10.
16. See 2 Nephi 25:23.
17. D&C 84:45.
18. D&C 1:39.
19. D&C 93:30.
20. D&C 93:30.
21. 2 Nephi 2:13.
22. Moroni 10:5.
23. D&C 93:30.
24. David Brooks, “If It Feels Right . . .,” *New York Times*, 12 September 2011.
25. Kimberly Winston, “Good without God? More Americans Say Amen to That,” *Religion News Service* 17 October 2017.
26. D&C 93:2.
27. D&C 84:46.
28. Packer, “Light of Christ,” 10.
29. 2 Nephi 2:5, 26; see also Moses 6:56.
30. Moroni 7:16–17, 19.
31. J. Budziszewski, “The Revenge of Conscience,” *First Things* 84 (June/July 1998): 22–23.
32. Budziszewski, “Revenge of Conscience,” 23.
33. See Alma 42:18.
34. Budziszewski, “Revenge of Conscience,” 25.
35. Budziszewski, “Revenge of Conscience,” 24.

36. 2 Nephi 2:27.
37. Budziszewski, “Revenge of Conscience,” 24.
38. Isaiah 5:20; see also 2 Nephi 15:20.
39. Budziszewski, “Revenge of Conscience,” 21–27.
40. John 3:19–21.
41. 2 Nephi 2:13.
42. See 2 Nephi 31:13, 17, 21; 3 Nephi 27:13–20.
43. See John 3:21.
44. John 8:31–32.
45. See D&C 84:49–51.
46. See D&C 84:38.
47. John 14:6.
48. See 2 Nephi 9:10–20.
49. D&C 93:37, 39.
50. Mosiah 10:11.
51. Alma 18:38–39.
52. Alma 19:6.
53. D&C 93:28.
54. Matthew 7:27; see also Matthew 7:26–27.
55. See Alma 33:22.