

Of Disciples and Higher Education

TRACY FLINDERS

Thank you, President, for the opportunity to say a few words this morning. I am grateful for your trust. I am also grateful for all those who work so hard before the meeting and behind the cameras to make these devotionals possible. And thanks to all of you for choosing to spend part of your day here this morning.

I am not a member of our distinguished faculty, and I have no formal teaching credentials. Rather, I stand before you as a fellow BYU student. I am not currently enrolled in any classes, and I haven't taken a test in the testing center for thirty years, but I do attend BYU every day. I have been a full-time employee at BYU for eighteen years now, informally—but intentionally—pursuing my “higher education” in the workplace. I will not likely receive another degree, but my education does continue, and I am grateful for that opportunity.

For twenty years, my father taught secondary education in the McKay School of Education here at BYU. While I was a student, I lived at home and

drove back and forth to campus every day with my dad. During our daily commute, we talked about school, baseball, horses, hunting, fishing, family, girls, and the gospel. We talked about life, and I learned so much from my dad. It was a wonderful blessing to spend that time with him each day.

When I would ask him about the hard questions I was struggling with or seek his advice about important decisions, I remember him saying, “If you will give the Lord equal time, together you'll figure it out.” That wise counsel has proven to be true for every major question, challenge, or decision I have faced in my life.

When I was younger—about your age—and on my way out the door for an evening with my friends, my parents used to say, “Tracy, remember who you are.” Those words echoed in my ears more than once when I found myself in places I shouldn't have been.

Who are we? What is our true identity? In today's polarized world of divisive identity

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politics, we need to know the answers to these foundational questions.

I would like to share a few thoughts on three subjects this morning: higher education, giving the Lord equal time, and the doctrine of identity.

In the spirit of higher education, I will begin by extending a simple invitation to each of you. Will you please find a piece of paper (or open an app on your phone) and record whatever the Holy Spirit teaches you in the next thirty minutes? As you listen to me this morning, will you please give the Lord equal time? If you will actively participate in this devotional, focusing your full attention on the words you are about to hear, and if you will open your heart to the Spirit, I promise He will speak to you today. What you learn or remember most from this address will be what the Holy Ghost teaches you.

We will focus our attention on what Jesus referred to as “the weightier matters” (Matthew 23:23) as I share four invitations and three brief stories from the scriptures. In these accounts, we will find the Savior teaching a few of His disciples individually in very personal, intimate encounters. With one exception, I will quote Jesus directly, and as I do, I invite you to take His words literally. Please write them down, and as you do, listen for His voice in your heart and in your mind. Record those words of personal revelation too. Capture them exactly as they come to you.

The Master Teacher

As we go along, I will pose a few questions for us to carefully consider, starting with this one: Why only quote the words of the Savior?

The answer is simple. Jesus Christ is the source of our higher education. We are blessed to live in a time when the words of ancient and living prophets are literally at our fingertips. There is no shortage of inspired, powerful, and relevant messages from prophets and apostles. We have been taught to make the consistent, careful study of their words a central part of our individual higher education. We will be blessed and protected as we listen to and follow inspired prophetic counsel. But Jesus Christ is the Master Teacher. There is something powerful about going straight to the Source.

At least two qualities set Jesus apart from all other teachers:

First, Jesus always teaches the truth. His teaching methodology does not include signal-boosting popular or critical theories or advocating secular, social, or political ideologies. He always teaches the truth. Clearly. Simply. Powerfully. As teachers, our subject matter *matters*, and our teaching is much more powerful when what we teach is actually true.

Second, Jesus teaches with authenticity and authority. His teaching credentials and credibility originate from who He is—the Son of God—and how He lived His life, not from the school He attended, the books He published, or the letters that precede or follow His name. His life aligned perfectly with His message. Likewise, we are better teachers when our personal lives align with the truths we teach.

So I think we can agree that Jesus is the greatest teacher of all time. Who is the second best? My vote goes to the Holy Ghost. Listen to what the Master Teacher said about the teaching role and capacity of the Holy Ghost: “He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance” (John 14:26).

The Holy Ghost both *teaches* and *reminds*. Think about that statement for a moment. We have direct access to a member of the Godhead who, if we seek Him and allow Him, will be our personal instructor and our constant companion, helping us to learn *all* that we need to know in this life. And then, when life’s difficult tests arrive and adversity strikes—and they surely will—and when questions arise, doubts creep in, and we stray from the truth, the Holy Ghost will remind us of the truth we once knew.

In a very literal way, we have direct, daily access to the two greatest teachers of all time—Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost. They will provide the higher education we seek. This is why I have chosen to quote only the Savior today and why I have invited you to listen for and record what the Holy Ghost whispers to you in the process. This is why we must give the Lord equal time.

There are many on this campus right now who are struggling. If you are one who is struggling

with feelings of loneliness, anxiety, or depression; who is wondering if you belong or where you fit in; who is wrestling with your faith, testimony, or identity; who is having doubts or concerns with a Church policy, practice, or leader; or perhaps who is even questioning your membership in the Church, I promise He will speak to you. I can make this bold promise with confidence because the promise is not mine. It comes to each of us from the Savior Himself. He said, “I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you” (John 14:18).

If you are looking for answers and peace in your life, if you need to experience higher education for a few minutes and want to know what “inspiring learning”¹ feels like, please give the Lord equal time, trust His voice, and find a way to record what He says to you, because what He whispers will be the very thing you need to hear.

Higher Education

What does the term *higher education* really mean? Higher than what? Our formal education begins in elementary school and then continues through middle school and high school. Is our education at BYU higher than that?

Each of you has chosen to come to BYU—a highly respected, accredited university. Being accredited means BYU meets the highest federal standards of educational quality in the United States. You could have chosen to attend any number of other prestigious universities, such as Notre Dame, Baylor, or Harvard. At BYU, are we striving to be “higher” than those schools?

With no intent to diminish the quality of those fine schools, if getting a higher education only means gaining secular knowledge from the most prestigious universities in the world, then we are aiming too low. We should elevate our vision. The promise of a higher education at BYU not only includes the highest quality instruction and meaningful research but also includes the direct influence of heaven. The BYU experience aims to develop faith, intellect, and Christlike character in a quest that will ultimately—in the far distant future—lead to perfection.² That sounds like a higher education to me, one that simply cannot be achieved without heavenly help. A higher education, quite literally, requires learning from

a higher source. At BYU we have the blessing to study, learn, and teach every topic “bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel” of Jesus Christ.³ We have access to inspiring, experiential learning, not only from gifted teachers, mentors, and administrators but also directly from heaven.

When the Savior said, “Seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118), His use of the word *seek* applied to both study and faith. Seeking requires action. Learning by study engages our minds. Learning by faith involves our hearts and our spirits. Both kinds of learning complement each other and take time. So as we pursue this higher form of learning, can we be patient with ourselves and with the Lord, trusting in Him and in His timing for us? Can we give ourselves a little grace and not demand to know everything or to achieve perfection right now?

There are some who feel they don’t have a testimony or who are experiencing a faith crisis. We all have times when we lose our spiritual footing. If you are in one of those trying, difficult times right now, hang on to these words from Jesus: “The Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man . . . that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:46).

If you can’t believe everything right now, at least believe that much. When life gets hard—and it does—the answer is not to turn away from God or to abandon our faith in Christ. It is much better to hold on to the truth we know while we work on the things we don’t know. With the blessing of time, continued faithful choices, and the influence of heaven, even the most difficult, frightening, and unsettling faith crisis can be transformed into one more step on our faith journey through mortality. I am not convinced that, with His eternal perspective, God sees our crises in the same way we do. He knows how real and difficult they are, but He can also see us emerging from the other side. If we give the Lord equal time in our lives, together with Him we will figure things out.

Christ’s Invitations

Now I would like to share the four invitations. During His mortal ministry, the Savior gave us the blueprint for higher education. These

easy-to-remember gospel methodologies provide a divine pattern for teaching, learning, and becoming. They create a beautiful, repeatable process that, when consistently followed, produces the most important learning outcome of all: becoming like Christ. We can apply this pattern to any question we may have or to any challenge we may face.

1. “Come unto Me”

Christ’s first invitation is combined with a promise and is extended to every child of God, particularly to those of us who are wrestling with heart-wrenching, soul-stretching challenges that seem to push us to our very limits. Here it is:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. [Matthew 11:28]

The invitation to come unto Christ is the first step for each of us. No matter where we are or what we may have done, no matter what question we may have or what pain we are feeling, if we want the help of heaven, our first step forward is to come unto Christ. Even if we can’t seem to feel His presence in our lives, the truth is that He is not far away. We may not have the answers or the solutions, but we can reach toward Christ. When we do, He will bless us with the peace we so desperately need.

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: . . . Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. [John 14:27]

2. “Take My Yoke upon You”

With a more peaceful heart, we will be prepared to accept Christ’s second invitation:

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me. . . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. [Matthew 11:29–30]

We are never alone. If we include the Savior in our lives, with the help of the Holy Ghost, the Savior will teach us all things. He promised:

I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little;

. . . for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have. [2 Nephi 28:30]

I share my witness that Jesus will lead us along, answering our prayerful questions in His own time and in His own way. He will keep the promise He made to a very troubled and distraught young prophet. After acknowledging and rehearsing a long list of terrible trials and agonizing anguish, Jesus said to Joseph Smith, the Prophet of the Restoration:

All these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good. . . .

Therefore, hold on thy way, . . . for God shall be with you forever and ever. [Doctrine and Covenants 122:7, 9]

This is the truth. I hope you are writing it down.

True learning is much more than merely grasping an idea or concept. Our learning deepens as we apply truth in our lives. In a word, our learning needs to become *experiential*. Have we ever heard that term on this campus? President Worthen has spoken at length about experiential learning.⁴

3. “Come, Follow Me”

This brings us to the third invitation. To the young, rich, faithful man who had tried to keep the commandments from his youth and desired to know “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18), the Master Teacher said:

Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me. [Luke 18:22; see also verses 18–24]

There is so much to learn in this simple yet stretching invitation. The Savior invites all disciples who strive to follow Him to do what may be the most difficult thing of all. He asks us to surrender our wills and to voluntarily choose Him. Jesus said:

I, the Lord, require the hearts of the children of men.
[Doctrine and Covenants 64:22]

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. [Matthew 6:21]

They draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. [Joseph Smith—History 1:19]

The Savior requires from students and teachers the one thing that administrators cannot effectively measure: He requires our hearts. He will lead us along as quickly as we are willing and able to follow.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. [John 14:6]

If we need help finding our way through life as we seek for the truth, Jesus is the answer.

4. “Go . . . and Teach”

As we continue with our higher education, we are asked to accept Christ’s fourth invitation. After thirty-three years on the earth, just before He ascended into heaven to go to His Father, our Lord and Savior extended a final invitation to His now seasoned and trained disciples:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations . . . : Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. [Matthew 28:19–20]

Part of our learning process is teaching others—by word and deed—the things we have learned. Please listen very carefully to what Jesus said to all who have the opportunity to teach:

I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.
[Luke 22:32]

Did you notice that even though we are teachers, our faith can fail? What we teach and how we teach it has a divine purpose beyond the mere sharing of secular knowledge. When we teach, we are instructed to strengthen our brethren. Our hearts, motives, and methods need to be pure.

As we consider our obligation to strengthen our brethren, is it possible that there are some on our campus who, however well intentioned, may actually be weakening the faith of others? Could it be that we have set our hearts so firmly on worldly treasures such as secular, social, or political ideologies—on either extreme—that we draw near to Christ with our lips but do not fully give Him our hearts? Is there something in our hearts that prevents us from fully embracing the recent invitation to hold and be worthy to hold a temple recommend? Do we cash our paychecks but replace the university mission with our own agendas or causes? These are hard personal questions that can only be answered individually with a mirror and with humility.

When we give the Lord our hearts and “seek not to declare [His] word, but first seek to obtain [His] word,” He gives this powerful promise:

Then shall your tongue be loosed; then, if you desire, you shall have my Spirit and my word, yea, the power of God unto the convincing of men. [Doctrine and Covenants 11:21]

This university is filled with faithful, knowledgeable, and highly skilled teachers, mentors, and administrators who have acquired a lifetime of experience and wisdom “in all the scholarly graces.”⁵ We are so grateful for you! We thank you for your sincere and consistent efforts to align your lives and your work with the gospel of Jesus Christ while enthusiastically embracing the unique prophetic mission and aims of this university. You do so well at bathing your subject matter in the light and color of the restored gospel. Please know of our heartfelt gratitude for each and every one of you.

These four invitations—“Come unto me,” “Learn of me,” “Come, follow me,” and “Go . . . and teach”—are timeless. Each one provides a simple, practical, repeatable gospel methodology we can use in our teaching and learning. When combined, they offer a pattern for changing our very natures—our character—as we become more like our heavenly parents, which is the ultimate learning outcome.

Scriptural Examples

Now let's briefly look at how these principles apply to the way Jesus taught three of His disciples, paying particular attention to the hearts of His students when they were faced with adversity.

First is the tender account of the troubled father whose son had been afflicted with a dumb spirit since he was a child. This tormenting spirit caused the boy to have seizures and attempted to destroy him. For years the father had tried everything to help his son, including taking him to the disciples to be healed. But they could not heal him.

Finally, in what must have felt like his very last resort, the father approached the Savior, who said, "Bring him unto me" (Mark 9:19). (Remember the first invitation?)

The desperate father then pled with the Savior, "If thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us" (Mark 9:22). (Have you ever felt a similar feeling of pure desperation?)

Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.

And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. [Mark 9:23–24; emphasis added]

Seeing the faith of this good father, Jesus "rebuked the foul spirit" (Mark 9:25) and then "took [the son] by the hand, and lifted him up" (Mark 9:27).

I love the faith and humility of this father!

Contrast this story with the account of Thomas, the doubting disciple. Shortly after His Resurrection, the Lord appeared to ten of His disciples, without Judas or Thomas. The disciples told Thomas about their miraculous experience: "We have seen the Lord" (John 20:25).

Thomas's heart and his response were different than that of the troubled father: "*Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe*" (John 20:25; emphasis added). Thomas placed conditions on his faith. He demanded physical evidence.

Are we like Thomas? Eight days later the Lord kept His previous promise.

Then came Jesus . . . and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you.

Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. [John 20:26–27]

In a moment he least expected, Thomas was reminded of the truth he had previously been taught. He had temporarily placed the secular in front of the spiritual, but he learned quickly and repented, saying, "*My Lord and my God*" (John 20:28; emphasis added). I love Thomas's response!

Finally, we see how Jesus tried to teach His friend Judas Iscariot. During the Last Supper, Jesus tried to warn him: "I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me" (Matthew 26:21).

The shocked disciples were troubled, wondering who it could be. After identifying Judas as the betrayer, "then said Jesus unto him, That thou doest, do quickly" (John 13:27). Jesus knew what Judas was about to do, and He wanted to minimize the pain that would surely follow. But Judas didn't listen. Instead, "Satan entered into him" (John 13:27).

[He] went unto the chief priests,

And said unto them, What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver.

And from that time he sought opportunity to betray him. [Matthew 26:14–16]

Judas prioritized money over faith.

A short time later, the wicked betrayal occurred: Judas "came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him" (Matthew 26:49).

In that moment of betrayal, Jesus knew Judas's heart and asked a relevant, soul-piercing question: "Friend, wherefore art thou come?" (Matthew 26:50). Even as Judas sinned, Jesus loved him and called him *friend*.

Can we apply the Savior's piercing question to our own experiences at BYU and ask ourselves, "For what purpose have we come to this university?" This is a great question.

If I am being honest, I can see elements of all three of these disciples in my own life. As I face

my own questions, weaknesses, and adversity, sometimes I offer my heart and can authentically and truthfully say, like the troubled father, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” But like Thomas, sometimes I place conditions on my faith and resist what the Lord is trying to teach me: “Except I shall see . . . , when I will not believe.” And unfortunately there are times when I harden my heart, fall prey to the influence of Satan, and must sadly admit, like Judas, “I have sinned . . . [and] have betrayed the innocent blood” (Matthew 27:4). I am so very grateful for the grace of God, for the joyous gift of repentance, and for the opportunity to be better.

Our Eternal Identity

In conclusion, I have one final lesson to share: the doctrine of identity. Eight words from our Heavenly Father provide perfect clarity on the matter. I will now make my one exception of only quoting the Savior; instead, I will quote our Father in Heaven. Please pay attention here.

When as a young boy Joseph Smith approached heaven in prayer, seeking wisdom and learning regarding a question that had troubled him deeply, he was given a higher education that was far more than he could have possibly imagined. The God of heaven, the Father of all, decided to make a rare personal visit. He invited His Son, Jesus Christ, the Creator and Savior of the world, to join Him. The first word Heavenly Father spoke was Joseph’s name (see Joseph Smith—History 1:17). Imagine how Joseph must have felt in that moment and then later as he reflected on the experience. With that single word—his name—Joseph learned that God is real and that He knew who Joseph was. He learned that his Father listened to and answered his prayers and that He cared about him and the details of his life.

Each one of the next seven words God spoke to Joseph also has notable significance, serving as both an introduction and an invitation to learn. “*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17; emphasis in original). Among other things, from these words we learn the truth about the doctrine of identity. Two things become perfectly clear: (1) God is Jesus’s Father, and the Father loves His Son. (2) Likewise, we are children

of God, and He loves us. Let’s also not overlook the fact that rather than answering Joseph’s question directly, which He certainly could have done, Heavenly Father instead brought Joseph to the Savior to learn. Even God Himself invites us to come to Jesus and learn of Him.

As children of God, we are literally one spiritual generation away from our heavenly parents, and we possess their spiritual DNA. This is our first, most fundamental, and eternal identity. It is the identity God has given us—not one of our own making—and it is who we really are and who we will always be. “Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 18:10). If we are looking for inclusion and belonging, there it is.

It is also instructive to note the secondary words Jesus used to identify us. Rather than referring to race, gender, or religion, Jesus has said:

Ye are my disciples. [3 Nephi 15:12]

Ye are my friends. [Doctrine and Covenants 84:63]

Ye are my stewards. [Doctrine and Covenants 104:86]

O ye my servants. [Doctrine and Covenants 68:5]

Ponder these identifying descriptors in context of teaching and learning at BYU. While it is true that we can accurately be identified by other distinctive characteristics such as gender, race, age, religion, or any number of other categories, Jesus didn’t spend much time on these parts of our identities. I wonder why. Is it because these terms inherently tend to divide us rather than unite us, especially when we set our hearts upon them? Wouldn’t the world be a more peaceful place if we could simply view and treat each other as children of God, disciples, and friends? I can hear my parents’ words again: “Tracy, remember who you are.”

I hope you have taken a note or two this morning and, most important, I hope you have felt heaven’s influence in your hearts.

I am grateful to be here at BYU, and I love the people I work with. I love to listen to people pray, especially my friends and family. Each Monday

morning we meet as a President’s Council, and these meetings always begin with prayer. I love to listen to these prayers because they are part of my higher education. It has been my great privilege to kneel and listen to each member of the President’s Council pray for you—many times. I cannot remember a single prayer that did not include you. In those prayers, we express our love for you, and we pray for your safety, both physical and spiritual. We pray for your success inside and outside the classroom. We pray that during your time at BYU, you will learn the things you need to know and become the people you need to be so that when you leave this beautiful campus, you will be able to serve and bless others and reflect the Savior’s light in a world that so desperately needs it. In our prayers, we express our sincere gratitude to all those who make it possible for us to be here together—faithful tithe payers, generous donors, and loving parents who have sent you with a great sacred trust to be in our care as you pursue

your education. We give thanks for the opportunity to serve you, and we ask for heaven’s help in doing so.

That we will remember who we are and give the Lord equal time as we, together with Him, pursue our own higher education is my humble prayer, in the name of the Master Teacher and our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Kevin J Worthen, “Inspiring Learning,” BYU university conference address, 22 August 2016.
2. See Aims of a BYU Education (1 March 1995).
3. Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity,” pre-school address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967, 11.
4. See Worthen, “Inspiring Learning.”
5. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.