

Teaching, Mentoring, and Things of the Spirit

MARVIN J. ASHTON

My respect associates of this great Brigham Young University, I am honored, challenged, and pleased to be with you on this occasion. I hope my remarks and observations will bring glad tidings into your various responsibilities and assignments as well as into your lives. As I stand before you, I remind you of what I constantly try to remind myself—that I was asked to be with you and speak on this subject because of the office I fill and not because of any superlative qualities I possess.

A few weeks ago I was reading from some of the writings of our prophet, Ezra Taft Benson, and was again impressed by his thoughts and his relationship to others. He said that one of this “most revered associates with the Brethren was with President J. Reuben Clark, Jr. He was a mentor to a few of us seated here this day. His was a depth of *intellect* and *breadth of wisdom* that marked him a giant among men. And that because these qualities were tempered with deep humility and a sense of great reverence and dependency upon God.”

He referred to President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., as his mentor and openly acknowledged how he was taught, tempered, and trusted by this great leader. Incidentally, may I remind you, by definition a mentor is a wise and trusted teacher or guide. He, President Clark, said on one very moving occasion:

“The youth of the Church, your students, are in great majority sound in thought and in spirit. The problem primarily is to *keep them sound, not to convert them.*

“The youth of the Church are hungry for things of the spirit; they are eager to learn the gospel, and they want it straight, undiluted. They want to know about the fundamentals . . . about our beliefs; they want to gain testimonies of their truth; they are not now doubters but inquirers, seekers after truth. *Doubt must not be planted in their hearts.*

“These students crave the faith their fathers and mothers have; they want it in its simplicity and purity . . . they wish to be not only the beneficiaries of this faith, but they want to be themselves able to call it forth to work.

“You teachers have a great mission. As teachers you stand upon the highest peak in education, for what teaching can compare in priceless value and in far-reaching effect with that which deals with man as he was in the eternity of yesterday, as he is in the mortality of

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today, and as he will be in the forever of tomorrow. Not only time but eternity is your field.”

As teachers, administrators, staff, and friends you have the opportunity to be mentor to many. How rewarding it will be to be mentor to those who associate with you closely on a daily basis.

In days past I identified with President N. Eldon Tanner, a counselor in the First Presidency four times. He was not only a prophet, seer, revelator, and apostle, but a mentor. He took the time and the occasion to lift, teach, and lead me and others when teaching moments were available. He was always bigger than any problem.

It seemed to me that whenever there were weighty decisions to be made at the highest levels of the Church, he had a unique capacity to be wise when others were disappointed, shocked, or dismayed. Never in a spirit of disgust or hurt did I ever hear him say “Oh no” or “How could she or he do that?” It was always “What can we do to help?” He was always a solver, never a moaner.

Let me take this opportunity to thank President Rex E. Lee for his leadership—for what he is and does. Almost 34 years ago he was called to serve on the General Board of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association while I was in the presidency of that organization. He was a young returned missionary with exceptional dedication and talents. As I look back now, I can see how he “mentored” some of us older ones as he vigorously championed programs for young men and young women. Today, yes, I and others can learn much if we appropriately respond to his leadership. You don’t have to be older than others to be their mentor. I look upon Provost Bruce C. Hafen as an administrator who is honest, wise, and good.

May I now quote—as a background and foundation for what I will refer to later—a statement recently made by your leaders from

an internal document entitled “Our Positioning Case Statement”:

“As a Church university, BYU has the responsibility to help students develop their spiritual strength as well as their academic proficiency—to help them learn that faith and reason go hand in hand. Wisdom, it has been revealed, is the result of acquiring knowledge through light and truth. Such enlightenment is said to be received through the *heart*, which encompasses more than just the intellect. Thus, it is often stated that BYU aims to educate the heart, for to educate just the mind would severely limit the human soul.

“Through this process of seeking for all truth in the light, BYU students learn wisdom—how to use truth for right and just purposes. The course is a rigorous one that involves both teacher and student and includes the development of, and respect for, the spirit that is in each of them.”

I wholeheartedly endorse those guidelines of great wisdom. Now from the 98th section of the Doctrine and Covenants, verse 10, there are three words that I would like to emphasize. Be *honest, wise, and good* in our personal lives, in our BYU responsibilities, and in the home. We should teach our associates and students by example the priceless strength that comes from this lifestyle.

I would like to reinforce to you in your BYU situation of service: You have been sought out, interviewed, approved, and employed because of your quality lives. We who work with you look forward to upholding and sustaining you in your lofty and righteous performances.

Some things change, and some remain the same.

In the category of those that remain the same is the relationship between Brigham Young University and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. BYU is owned and operated by the Church. During the lifetime of all of those present here, the Church has appropriated to BYU a large proportion of the tithing

paid by members of the Church. Because of the importance the Church attaches to education, the BYU Board of Trustees is composed of the most senior leaders of the Church. The board of trustees appoints the president and other leaders of the university, and the board of trustees makes the basic policy decisions about the nature and mission of the university and the way in which that mission will be accomplished. These things have not changed.

In contrast, there have been enormous changes in the environment within which the university performs its mission. Not long ago, almost any young member of the Church who desired to enroll at BYU in Provo or Hawaii or at Ricks College was able to obtain admission. The remarkable growth of the Church has changed that. Today only a tiny fraction of the membership of the Church can enroll at BYU or these other colleges, and that fraction gets smaller every year, even though the percent of tithing revenues devoted to higher education has not declined significantly. The contrast between those who are favored by admission and those who are not is very painful for all concerned. It inevitably causes all of us to have serious reflection about the mission of BYU and the way that mission is being performed.

For the past two years the board of trustees and committees of board members, working with President Lee and his associates, have been giving intensive and prayerful study to fundamental issues, which as the nature of the university, how it is financed, how it relates to other parts of the Church Educational System, and how we determine who is admitted. That work continues.

Here on this campus you have done impressive work on these and related problems. For example, the board of trustees is very impressed with the work of your faculty committee under the chairmanship of Professor John Tanner. Their suggestions on definitions of academic freedom for the individual teacher and for the institution are vitally important.

It is important that our teachers have the freedom to teach and research in their fields of study. At the same time, it is imperative that everyone who works at BYU and everyone who supports the university (and that includes every tithing payer in the Church) understands the nature and mission of this university.

We do not question the need to familiarize university students with facts we deplore or theories we reject. But, in the exercise of our institutional academic freedom, we do insist that the teachers in the various institutions of our Church Educational System not use their classrooms or their privileged positions as professors to advocate or foster ideologies or philosophies or actions that are contrary to the standards of the gospel of Jesus Christ, including the standards of decency or morality that are embodied in the university's honor code. The unworthy, the indecent, or the immoral have no place on this campus, no place in the programs of this university, and no place in the personal conduct of our students or our faculty or staff.

We expect that our Church Educational System personnel, including the faculty and staff at BYU, will be role models in the way they use the sacred resources appropriated by the Church. This includes not only financial resources but also the prestige they enjoy as representatives of the Church. As members of the Church, they should also be exemplary in the way they keep the commandments of God and in the way they respond to the counsel our leaders give to the members of the Church.

"Wherefore, honest men and wise men should be sought for diligently, and good men and wise men ye should observe to uphold; otherwise whatsoever is less than these cometh of evil.

"And I give unto you a commandment, that ye shall forsake all evil and cleave unto all good, that ye shall live by every word which proceedeth out of the mouth of God.

“For he will give unto the faithful line upon line, precept upon precept; and I will try you and prove you herewith.” (D&C 98:10–12)

May I encourage all of us this year as we approach new responsibilities and challenges to teach vigorously the basics of being honest, wise, and good in life and in the lecture room. The world today—and yes, the Church today—is looking for direction from those who live these traits. It seems today as I travel and reorganize stake presidencies and instruct mission presidents worldwide, I am getting back more and more to stressing these fundamental basics of the abundant life. The important roles of leadership must be wrapped in honesty, goodness, and wise performance. Love the scriptures. Teach and live through and by them. Teach and live with the gospel of Jesus Christ as your anchor, foundation, and inspiration.

May I share with you a last paragraph from former Secretary of Education William J. Bennett’s new book *The De-Valuing of America*:

“Reclaiming our institutions is less a political opportunity than a civic obligation. It involves hard work. But it is work of imminent importance. At the end of the day, somebody’s values will prevail. In America, ‘we the people’ have a duty to insist that our institutions and our government be true to their time-honored tasks. In some instances that means that the American people must roll up their sleeves and work to ensure that their institutions and government reflect their sentiments, their good sense, their sense of right and wrong. That is what a democracy—a government of, by, and for the people—is all about. The debate has been joined. *But the fight for our values has just begun.*”

Let me share with you a remarkable statement by President Spencer W. Kimball that illustrates to us how we may develop more spirituality in our lives. “I find that when I get casual in my relationship with divinity and when it seems that no divine ear is listening and no divine voice is speaking, that I am far,

far away. If I immerse myself in the scriptures the distance narrows and the spirituality returns. I find myself loving more intensely those whom I must love with all my heart and mind and strength, and loving them more I find it easier to abide their counsel. (*Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, p. 135.)

Personal honesty is a must in individual happiness and true leadership. Certainly it is greater to be trusted than loved. A worthy daily prayer is: “Lord, help me to be honest with myself. Help me to be true to myself.” Jesus taught in plainness. Jesus, the master teacher, taught love, hope, and faith with perfect integrity, even with a perfect life. I thank God that one of our Articles of Faith does not say: “We believe in honesty.” It is more compelling and reasonable to say “We believe in being honest.” Over the years it has not only been rewarding but challenging to hear by the grapevine, if you please, “Marvin J. Ashton can be trusted.”

Be honest in your classes. Be honest in your offices. Be honest in your human relationships. Be honest in your preparations. Be honest in your counseling procedures. Be honest in your daily lives. I thank God for leaders like you who instill in others the overwhelming influence of integrity in all things. I thank God Brigham Young University has the best administrators, faculty, and support staff of any university in the world. With that recognition our challenge is to rise to new heights.

Early on I can remember a good father saying, “I would rather have my son drink 10 cups of coffee a day than tell a lie.” He didn’t want me to drink coffee either. He was just setting proper priorities. Some top students and associates can be destroyed by people who are not honest in their comments and instruction. Some would rather share flattery or tickle the ear than indulge in constructive instruction.

Let me share a few thoughts about education and teaching with wisdom and being wise enough to make decisions that are worthy. I

carry in my daily datebook a few brief memo sheets that I like to refer to frequently. One sheet almost worn out now has nothing more on it than Jacob 6, verse 12, "O be wise; what can I say more?"

Be wise enough to accept appropriate discipline and guidelines. Be wise enough to say the right words at the right time to the right person. Be wise enough to live and teach within designated guidelines. Be wise enough to know there is always going to be opposition from those who would have us trip or falter. We need scholars, teachers, and administrators who are balanced. We need intellectuals who are intelligent. We need probers who aggressively pursue the truth. We need researchers who are willing to pray. We need teachers who teach with Christlike parables. Ever bear in mind that Jesus was the wisest or the wise, even brilliant, in his relationships with people.

A certain prophet, President Spencer W. Kimball, on one occasion a few years ago asked me to accompany him to the Utah State Prison. He invited me to go to the vineyards with him because I, Marvin J. Ashton, knew the location. He wanted to spend some time with those confined to prison. On this occasion I heard and saw a prophet declare glad tidings in a way that has left me with an everlasting impression. It was a unique invitation. It was an unusual request. I doubt that any other apostle in modern days has had an experience that comes even close to this. I learned much from a prophet who was wise.

May I say in the beginning when he first asked me to accompany him to the prison at the point of the mountain. I felt impressed to say to him. "President Kimball, I don't want you to go to the prison for a visit. I've had enough experience there to know that your life would be in danger, and some people would do anything to get attention, embarrass, or even harm you. Please, President Kimball, if you don't mind, let's not go right now."

A few days passed and he talked to me on the telephone again and said, "Marv, I want to go to the prison with you." I could tell that he was earnest and very sincere. The time for delay was over. I called the warden and asked him if we could come down the following day and visit with him and two inmates of his choice. He agreed, and I took President Kimball to the institution.

We were greeted by the warden and taken to his office. He hadn't been there very long when two inmates were invited to come in and meet with us. They were in their prison garb and looked hard. I felt very uneasy when the steel door closed behind them and we were left with the two of them, the Prophet, myself, and the warden.

President Kimball shook their hands before we all sat down. This was followed by a brief period of intense silence. The prisoners were looking at the floor. President Kimball was looking at them, and I was looking at him. After this awkward period of silence was over, President Kimball started off with what seemed to me to be an unusual approach. The thought crossed my mind that he could say: "What are you in here for? Why did you do it? When do you get out? You ought to be ashamed of yourselves," or "What is your previous record?" To my pleasure and further education and for their involvement, he looked at the one, and said to my surprise: "Tell me about your mother." The prisoner responded and told President Kimball and others of us assembled about his mother, the details of which are not important for my purposes today.

When this was over, with the prisoner doing the talking and President Kimball doing the listening, President Kimball finally looked at the other prisoner and said: "What does your father do for a living?" He too responded with comments, and the Prophet gave complete attention and listened intently. In a few minutes I had seen and heard a prophet counsel and interview. They looked at him, responded,

and looked in his face while he gently listened. Before our interview was over, word had spread that President Kimball was at the prison visiting, and some of the media were outside the doors waiting for pictures and conversation with President Kimball. President Kimball invited some of the press into the room with a cameraman. One reporter said, "President Kimball, we'd like to have a picture of you talking to these two inmates." President Kimball granted the interview by standing up promptly and getting between the two prisoners as the picture was taken.

I recall as though it were yesterday what he said after the picture was taken. He shook one hand and then the other and said, "Thank you, boys, for letting me have my picture taken with you." One of these hardened prisoners was in for murder and the other one for grand larceny. To say they were touched and responsive is an understatement.

I will never forget the impact of this visit upon me and my future. A wise, gentle prophet conducted his interview without embarrassment, without ridicule, and without condemnation. I know I have told this story before and shared it around the Church, but I felt impressed to relive it with you just for a few moments today as we think of interviewing, counseling, instructing, and touching lives with wisdom. Frankly I still wonder if President Kimball's main purpose for the visit was to see the prisoners or to teach a new apostle in a live classroom. How wonderful it would be if we could counsel with wisdom under all circumstances. A well-respected administrator or teacher should be skilled in asking right questions.

Some months later in another vineyard a mother and father were in my office accompanied by a 265-pound BYU sophomore All-WAC tackle. They had asked for an appointment to help resolve a confusing family situation. After we greeted the mother and the father and their son, Lance Reynolds, we had a few words of

friendly conversation. I knew why they had come. The trying decision was Does Lance go on a mission or does he stay and play football?

I looked at the mother and said, "What do you think your son should do?" She said, "I think he can render a special service and example to the Church if he maintains his standards and continues to play football and hopefully help in bringing football fame to BYU and the Church. I think his football playing can be his mission."

I looked at the father, and I said, "What do you think Lance should do?" He was smart enough not to disagree in that setting with his wife, so he merely said, "I'm not quite certain." I looked at Lance and I said, "Lance, what do you want to do?" He said, "I want to go on a mission." I responded with, "Why don't you?" He said, "I will." Our interview was over. Lance went on his mission, was an outstanding missionary, came back and reaped all-conference honors, and is now on BYU's football coaching staff. He is a special friend of mine today.

I hope you can relate to these two experiences. Jesus went about doing good. Jesus taught single ideas. He drove home the single point in each of his parables. We should avoid shotgun approaches. A good lesson or interview should be like a rifle shot—to the point and with some decision reached.

Let me conclude with a few thoughts in regard to being good. To be good for our purposes today is to be someone who is caring, someone who conducts himself in such a way that others know that service and being good to all others under every circumstance is the abundant life. Being good does not start in the classroom or in the office of administrators. It is an every-hour, significant way of life. Let us ever remember that being good is a pleasure, a joy beyond measure. Let us lead in such a manner that being good is a way of life that must be natural, commonplace, and sincere. I like to think someone is good, in the full sense of

the word, when they care about others without thought of self.

What greater recognition and honor can come to anyone than to be identified as a good teacher. Jesus Christ was the master teacher. A stalwart like BYU's Hugh Nibley teaches us much when he said, "I have always been furiously active in the Church, but I have . . . never held an office or rank in anything; I have undertaken many assignments given me by the leaders of the Church, and much of the work has been anonymous—no rank or recognition, no anything. While I have been commended for some things, they were never the things I considered most important—that was entirely a little understanding between me and my Heavenly Father, which I have thoroughly enjoyed, though no one else knows anything about it."

A recent *Wall Street Journal* editorial made the following observation:

"Los Angeles has brought home to the country and the world what people close to the cauldron have been saying for a long time: No progress is possible in America's most troubled parts while so many people grow up without parents, without dignity, without knowledge, without morals or without respect—from others and within themselves. In a word, without hope."

Let me conclude by saying I thank God for good people like you who are willing to be reminded and hopefully instructed by one who has a few thoughts that possibly can be helpful. The glory of God is intelligence, and for my purposes here today I declare that there is no true intelligence without honesty, wisdom, and goodness. I do so in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

