

Our Moral Test

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President Samuelson; trustees, faculty, and staff of Brigham Young University; honored guests; parents; family members; and graduates: My dear brothers and sisters, Sister Christofferson and I offer our congratulations, respect, and love to all of you. We thank you for the privilege of being with you on this grand occasion and rejoice with you in the achievements that we honor today. We are pleased to have been authorized to convey to you the greetings of President Thomas S. Monson, his counselors in the First Presidency, and the members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. We extend those greetings and their commendations most warmly.

In preparing my remarks to you, I have determined not to follow the example of my brother, the Apostle Paul, when he spoke to the Saints in Troas. It is reported in the book of Acts that “upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.”¹ The cartoonist Garry Trudeau is purported to have said, “Commencement speeches were invented largely in the belief that outgoing college students should never be released into the world until they have

been properly sedated.”² I’ll do what I can, but I don’t want to over-sedate you.

It is traditional, of course, in graduation speeches to offer counsel. One sage proffered this advice: “Your families are extremely proud of you. You can’t imagine the sense of relief they are experiencing. This would be a most opportune time to ask for money.”³ Then there are references to the wisdom of the ages. I remember my father’s aphorism repeated often with some exasperation to his five sons: “For every mistake made for not knowing, 10 are made for not looking.” This afternoon, however, I would like to call upon the insights of our departed friend and colleague Professor Hugh Nibley.

We knew Professor Nibley as a man of superior intellect and honest spirituality. I remember my first sighting of him during my freshman year at BYU. It was in the library as I passed a table laden with perhaps two dozen books, most of them open and stacked one upon another in a semicircle in front of an

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empty chair. As I wondered who could possibly absorb all of that material in one sitting, the legendary scholar appeared out of the stacks carrying three or four more books. I tried not to stare, but it wouldn't have mattered; Professor Nibley ignored me completely and dove into the books. I was impressed and more than a little motivated. I wish I could tell you that after that experience I never again slumped over a library desk with my face in a book asleep, but dishonesty would be unbecoming in someone in my position.

Hugh Nibley was a graduate student at Berkeley during the Great Depression. He was able to finance his education there with some struggle and a translation job that fortuitously came his way. It is reported that for a time he was extremely discouraged. I quote Boyd Jay Petersen:

When he returned to his family's home in Hollywood for the Christmas vacation at the end of 1936, his discouragement had become a full-blown depression, [and he said], "Those were desperate times." He even began to doubt the truthfulness of the Church. "I thought there were certain flaws in the gospel," says Hugh. "I was terribly bothered about this afterlife business and that sort of thing. I had no evidence for that whatever." That all changed when Hugh came down with appendicitis and was taken to the hospital. When the doctor turned the ether on, Hugh swallowed his tongue and stopped breathing. While unconscious, Hugh experienced a life-after-life experience that reoriented his life. "I didn't meet anything or anybody else, but I looked around, and not only was I in possession of all my faculties, but they were tremendous. I was light as a feather and ready to go."

This experience had a profound influence on Hugh. Certainly education remained important to him throughout the rest of his life. However, this experience was a "higher" form of education that helped him recognize that the most important tests in this life are not administered in the classroom. This knowledge helped him not take life too

seriously, [and he wrote], "We're just dabbling around, playing around, being tested for our moral qualities, and above all the two things that we can be good at: we can forgive and we can repent."⁴

There is no question that it is good to strive to fill our souls with light and truth, described in the scriptures as intelligence.⁵ I congratulate you again on having been anxiously engaged in seeking learning, "even by study" and I hope "also by faith."⁶ I trust you will continue to do so, diligently and throughout your life. We understand that

whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.

And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come.⁷

Even so, as Professor Nibley observed, in this limited mortal experience "we're just dabbling around" in our learning. None of us while here will approach the intelligence or glory of God. It behooves us to be humble. We live with an awareness of our divine heritage and destiny, yet not forgetting our present earthly confines.

The Hasidic rabbis taught: "Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other according to his need. In his right pocket are the words, 'For my sake the world was created,' and in the other, 'I am [but] earth and ashes.'"⁸

In my experience, those who have cultivated their capacities of mind and spirit, who have developed an uncommonly large store of knowledge and wisdom, are typically the most humble of men and women. In diligently applying themselves, they have gained a greater sense of the vast breadth and depth of truth, and they appreciate more than most how small a portion of truth we really know. It is those who know

a little as they suppose who oftentimes assume they know a great deal and become guilty of hubris. Indeed, the greatest stumbling block to learning more may be the conviction that we already know nearly everything.

We rightly rejoice in and express gratitude for all that God has revealed in rewarding both spiritual and scientific inquiry, but at the same time we must acknowledge how much more has not been revealed. As God Himself has expressed it:

My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.

*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*⁹

For those who show themselves capable and desirous, there will be time and opportunity enough now and in the eternities to truly know and understand “things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come.”¹⁰ The real, the core purpose of this mortal experience is the moral test: Will we in fact “do all things whatsoever the Lord [our] God shall command [us]”?¹¹ Our central quest is to learn and to live the celestial law: “For he who is not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory.”¹² If we can learn to abide the celestial law, we become what the scripture calls persons “of a celestial spirit.”¹³ In the Resurrection such persons receive a celestial body, and in due course they receive a fullness of that celestial glory by which they have been quickened¹⁴—or, in other words, the same fullness of light and truth that constitute the intelligence and glory of God.

Let us suppose that there is a man whose employment it is to come here after today’s ceremonies and stack and store all the folding chairs that some of the graduates and faculty are occupying. Actually, I’m sure there will be a number of people involved—and probably most of them fellow students—but let us

suppose that this particular individual is not a graduate of this or any other institution of higher learning because circumstances may have denied him the chance or his interests and skills run in another direction. As a consequence, there are some opportunities that are denied him and potential attainments that are foreclosed to him. It is to me, however, a mark of the justice of God that despite any such limitations, our friend may excel as fully as you and I in the moral test that is at the heart of our mortal experience. There is nothing in what has been denied him that precludes his leaving mortality with feet planted firmly on the path of celestial law that will enable him eventually to attain omniscience. I am reminded of C. S. Lewis’ profound observation, “It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. . . . There are no *ordinary* people.”¹⁵

One way to think of the celestial law is Professor Nibley’s simple statement: “The two things that we can be good at: we can forgive and we can repent.” We also have James’ concise and profound expression: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”¹⁶ In other words, our test is to learn to serve one another and to attain personal holiness. All the commandments of God tend to one, or usually both of these ends at the same time. BYU professor emeritus Chauncey C. Riddle has observed:

*Many people reject [the celestial law] because it does not allow them to take advantage of other human beings and requires repentance from every sin (which repentance is to stop taking advantage of other human beings and to truly bless them instead). The weakness that prevents and destroys Zion is human selfishness.*¹⁷

As you look forward to a new phase of life, I urge you to recommit to the celestial law and the Christian standard of greatness:

Whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister:

*And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all.*¹⁸

If it is not already yours, seek for the blessing of marriage and family, where your service can be the most vital, the most unselfish, and the most fulfilling. And if this blessing is denied you until later, serve the children, especially the fatherless, who come within your ambit. And don't forget those who call you aunt or uncle. Bless all those you can with your wisdom and means. Jesus says to you:

Whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.

*For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? . . .*¹⁹

*Therefore deny yourselves of these, and be not ashamed of me.*²⁰

John Dryden in his poem *The Hind and the Panther* expressed the better nature of mankind that we aspire to develop more fully by repenting, forgiving, and serving:

*Beasts are the subjects of tyrannic sway,
Where still the stronger on the weaker prey;
Man only of a softer mould is made,
Not for his fellows' ruin, but their aid:
Created kind, beneficent and free,
The noble image of the Deity.*²¹

Today we recognize your very significant achievements. We are happy for you and with you. We place robes on your shoulders and mortar boards, tassels, and other marks of honor upon your head and about your neck. At the same time, my plea to you is not to let this achievement or any other success or failure

blind you to your central purpose on earth: to learn to do whatsoever the Lord your God may command. You and I achieved success in the moral test of our premortal first estate. It was a limited but crucial test that opened the way for our current and broader test—one that takes place in a physical body, in a fallen world, and outside God's personal presence. Whatever time and experiences your particular moral test may entail, success will mean glory (that is, light and truth) "added upon [your] heads for ever and ever."²² Without diminishing this day, I urge you to keep your eye on the prize. Let your *cap and gown* point you to the infinitely greater *robe and crown* that await you in God's celestial realm.

I pray that you will have a full measure of the guidance, protection, and gifts of the Holy Ghost. I pray that day by day and year by year you will draw ever closer to "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."²³ I affirm my witness of His reality, divinity, and grace and of His desire to walk with you in the moral test that is your life on earth. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Acts 20:7.
2. Garry Trudeau; quoted in *Incoming: Webster's Quotations, Facts and Phrases* (San Diego: Icon Group International, 2008), 3.
3. Gary Bolding, "Graduation Quotes and Sayings" at www.buzzle.com/articles/graduation-quotes-and-sayings.html.
4. Boyd Jay Petersen, "Hugh Nibley: A Life of Faith, Learning, and Teaching," *BYU Religious Education Review*, winter 2010, 13; Hugh Nibley quotations are from a transcription of *The Faith of an Observer: Conversations with Hugh Nibley*, DVD (Provo: Brigham Young University; American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2004).
5. See D&C 93:36.
6. D&C 88:118.
7. D&C 130:18–19.

8. William B. Silverman, *Rabbinic Stories for Christian Ministers and Teachers* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), 49.
9. Isaiah 55:8–9.
10. D&C 93:24.
11. Abraham 3:25.
12. D&C 88:22.
13. D&C 88:28.
14. See D&C 88:29.
15. C. S. Lewis, last paragraph of “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 14–15; emphasis in original.
16. James 1:27.
17. Chauncey C. Riddle, *Think Independently: How to Think in This World but Not Think with It* (Provo: Rescate Publishing, 2009), 91.
18. Mark 10:43–44.
19. Mark 8:35–36.
20. JST, Mark 8:40.
21. John Dryden, *The Hind and the Panther* (1687), part 1, lines 245–49.
22. Abraham 3:26.
23. Ephesians 4:13.