

The Gift of Knowing

F. BURTON HOWARD

"It's Knowing What's Right That's Hard!"

Upon graduating from law school, I was fortunate to obtain a position as a clerk at the Utah Supreme Court. I became there intimately acquainted with the workings of the court and came to know personally the judges who presided. Part of my work was to review and outline the facts of a particular case, to research the applicable law, and then to play what is sometimes called the devil's advocate with the judge who would eventually write the opinion deciding the matter. It was an exciting and challenging thing to do. I remember vividly listening to the persuasive arguments of the lawyers for the opposing parties and being swayed first by one and then by the other as case after case was argued on appeal.

Some years later, after leaving the court, I had occasion as a practicing attorney to use the library at the state capitol. There I happened to meet the chief justice, whom I knew well. He invited me into his office to chat about old times. As we talked about the law and the problems of the practice, our conversation turned to the administrative challenges of running the court. My friend the chief justice was weary. In a few months he would be old enough to retire and leave contention and

controversy to others. He indicated that he had given serious thought to doing just that.

"What would *you* think if I retired?" he asked.

Although I could understand the reasons why he might want to escape from the heavy responsibility of the court, I blurted out my instinctive reaction to his question.

"Oh, judge," I said, "please don't do that. You will never know how comforting it is to those of us who practice here to have someone on the court who always tries to do what's right."

Now that was not a sophisticated or a reasoned response to his question. It was unlawyer-like on my part, I suppose. But it was a heartfelt and overly simplified statement of truth. I intended it as a compliment. To my surprise, he became angry. He raised his voice, furrowed his brow, and said,

"Heavens, Burt, any fool can *do* what's right. It's *knowing* what's right that's hard!"

F. Burton Howard was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 31 October 1982.

Of course, he did not mean that he had a greater ability to do right than anyone else. He did not mean that fools find it easy to obey the law. Nor did he intend to depreciate the difficulty of *doing* anything. My friend had, however, unerringly focused upon his greatest concern as a judge. What he was saying was that, while not everyone applied the law to their own conduct, it was not hard to do so once the law had been determined. It was then a relatively simple matter of doing it or not. What was much more difficult was to determine what the law should be and to decide between two competing, attractive, and well-reasoned alternatives presented by articulate and sophisticated spokesmen. The more difficult thing for him was to choose or determine or to decide which of two compelling courses was correct. *That* was hard.

Is this not true in our lives as well? While not implying that we always are able to do what we know—to keep the commandments, to pay our tithing, to be honest, and so forth (and I know that for most of us these things are hard enough)—nevertheless, let me suggest that what is infinitely more difficult is to choose or know what to do at the countless crossroads which come every day into our lives. Especially is this true when the choices which are presented to us all appear to be equally persuasive or attractive.

Examples from Everyday Life

Let me illustrate. Imagine with me that you are a college student. That shouldn't be too difficult. It is eight-thirty in the morning. You got up late because you went to bed late. You have an assignment due in your 9-a.m. class. You have not finished it. You are not presentable, and you haven't had breakfast. You know that you might possibly make it to class on time if you hurry and remain hungry.

It also occurs to you that if you stayed home and worked on the assignment all day, you could type it up in finished form. You

could then put yesterday's date on it and hand it in tomorrow. You could tell the professor that it was done on time, but that you had a one-hundred-degree fever or the twenty-four-hour flu and couldn't get out of bed. Part of that might be true.

What do you do? You know you should tell the truth. You know that you should be in class. You know about integrity. These absolute values are known, and, if you were asked questions regarding them in the abstract, you would clearly know what the answers should be. However, in the context of the end justifying the means, it might also seem important that you get your assignment in, that you not fail the class, that you keep faith with your parents who are paying your tuition, and that you stay on track in your major subject so as to be able to graduate. And so, what might in isolation be simple turns out to be a complex problem of daily living for you. It is easy to rationalize and say, "It is too late to get to class now. It would do no good to hurry. Play it cool. Everyone calls in sick once in a while. The professor will never know."

Everyday choices come into our lives which constantly require us to apply what we know. Doing what we know is right is then relatively easy. Knowing what to do in the face of competing, conflicting choices is more difficult.

Let me give you another example. Imagine with me again that you have been looking for a job for months. You are behind on your car payments, and, unless you get something soon, the finance company will repossess your automobile. It is early on a rainy November morning; you are on your way to the most promising job interview you have ever had. Once again you are late. The gas gauge indicates that you will have just enough fuel to get there if you are lucky. You slow down for a stoplight and see an acquaintance standing in the rain at the bus stop. You know that, if you give your friend a ride, you will be even later. You know that, unless you exceed

the speed limit, you won't arrive at the appointed hour. You know that, if you get another moving violation, you will lose your license.

A decision must be made—what do *you* do? If the situation could be broken down, all of us would know what should be done about any individual item: You should not speed, you should stop for gas, you should give your friend a helping hand, and, of course, the job is important to your financial well-being and happiness. It merits almost any honorable effort to obtain it. But out of all of this, what do *you* do? Either you stop or you don't. Either you speed or you do not. Does it matter if you break the law? Does it matter if you get the job? Does it matter if you lose your license? Is it important if you fail to give your friend a ride? Are there hidden and unforeseen consequences of possibly running out of gas or driving too fast? Are there eternal consequences as well?

In such instances, knowing what to do can be most difficult, and the consequences of making wrong choices can be permanent and irretrievable.

So it is in the illustrations which I have given. Going or not going to a class, getting too close to sin, stopping in the wrong place or failing to stop at all, obeying or disregarding moral laws or the laws of the land—all of these things may eternally affect the course of your existence. What then to do? How do we find the right course? And having found it, how do we maintain it?

Challenges of Gospel Living

It is relatively easy to stay on the strait and narrow path as long as traffic is light and the road is marked. All we have to do is hold the course. But, at frequent moments along the way, we meet others living their lives and exercising their free agency. Without wanting it to be so, we find their demands and expectations influencing our behavior and coloring

our choices. The testing time comes when friends say, "Come on. Don't be a spoilsport," or "It's o.k.; everybody does it," or "No one will know."

At such moments we discover that it is not easy to see, let alone maintain, our course. We find that it is difficult to prepare in advance answers to all of life's questions. We come to know that there are many unmarked junctions in mortality, and that we often arrive at them in the dark without signposts or road maps to help us select the way.

In other words, the problem of applying what we know to the choices which confront us every day in the world is never easy. The challenges of gospel living come to us not in circumstances of our own choosing, not necessarily one at a time, not often in the classroom, but in situations which we do not fully control.

All of us want the good life; all of us want to be honest and virtuous and to do good to all men. These ultimate values have been pronounced good by God himself. None of us would argue with them, and indeed could not.

But believing in being honest is one thing. It is still another to *be* honest when the forces of daily life make it appear advantageous to be otherwise. Professing concern for others is one thing, but choosing to serve others at an interchange where our own convenience and benefit are prominently present is the real test of our commitment to the second great commandment.

To see our way clearly through the conflicts of everyday living so as to find the course which will ultimately prove to be the best course—that is hard. This is because in much of life the rules have not been revealed, the way is not lighted, and there is no precedent. Each of us must find and walk his or her own path to perfection. The scriptures provide much help and we can profit from the experiences of others, but the fact remains that life is full of lonely moments when we alone decide what we will or will not do.

Part of the Plan

It would surprise me very much if the Lord did not know all of this. I am very certain that he wants it to be this way. He tells us, for example,

It is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward.

Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness.

For the power is in them wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward. [D&C 58:26–28]

In other words, it is intended that we have a significant measure of discretion and control over our own lives. In areas where we are not commanded, we are to be agents unto ourselves. We are not going to be controlled or commanded from heaven in these areas, whether we want to be or not.

Section 98 of the Doctrine and Covenants tells us why. Simply stated, the reason is that we are on probation. There the Lord says:

And I give you a commandment, that ye shall forsake all evil and cleave unto all good, that ye shall live by every word which proceedeth forth 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 . . . for I have decreed in my heart, saith the Lord, that I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant, even unto death, that you may be found worthy.

For if ye will not abide in my covenant ye are not worthy of me. [D&C 98:11–12, 14–15]

Mortal probation requires that God's children make conscious choices. Were it otherwise, the Lord could not determine who we

really are and what we really want. It is of this area where no specific counsel or commandments have been given—where it is not know what to do or how to do it—where free agency is in absolute sway—that I speak. This is the sphere of which my friend on the supreme court said, “It is knowing what’s right that’s hard.”

We must recognize that throughout our lives we will be required to choose between duty or obligation and other more or less attractive alternatives. Should we watch television or go visiting teaching? Should we spend time with the family or with friends? Do we read the scriptures or the latest novel? Do we leave the children home or take them with us? Do we go into debt or do without? Each of these choices when made excludes others. Were it otherwise, there could be no real probation. The Designer of the plan of salvation made it that way. By watching and observing where our hearts are as the result of the free choices we make, he then knows who and what we really are.

Often we are required to choose between two good things. This is one of the paradoxes of modern Mormonism. For example: there is a direct relationship between the amount of time spent on a particular calling and the amount of good one can do. A bishop does much good by visiting a needy member. He does ten times as much good by visiting ten needy members. How much time should he spend visiting? We get close to the Lord by studying the scriptures and pondering them. We get closer still by studying harder and pondering more. How much, then, should we study? A good father spends time with his family. A better father spends more time and has a regular weekly evening out with his wife as well.

Where is the line to be drawn? When is enough enough and more too much? How can we tell if we are active enough, serving others enough, loving enough, home enough,

or whether the balance needs to be adjusted to avoid jeopardizing our salvation? Aristotle once said:

It is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle . . . anyone can get angry—that is easy—or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble. [Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, The World's Great Thinkers, Vol. 2, Man and Man: The Social Philosophers (New York: Random House, 1947 p. 39)]

Could a man be a better husband if he spent every evening at home with his wife? Could he be a better husband if he had no children, thereby having all of his spare time to dedicate to her? The answer is a resounding no! No one—husband, wife, children or church—has the claim on the full time of someone else. Children with all the time of their parents would be overshadowed and become dependent. The Church with full-time bishops would have a paid ministry and become an end in itself rather than a divine organization to help perfect the individual children of God.

Striking a Balance Essential

It is impossible to provide detailed instructions for each person and circumstances because the balance varies according to the specific needs and abilities of each individual member of the Church. But somewhere short of total commitment to each of the great causes of family, church, employment, and self there is a balance among them all that is desirable—and not only desirable, but obviously necessary because of time limitations imposed upon us by our creator. Let us not make the mistake of criticizing the inheritance of time given us by our Father. Let us rather look at what he

would have us do with the time we have been given.

There are certain areas of stewardship that we must enter. They are not and indeed must not be mutually exclusive. Each requires time. It takes time to be a father, a Relief Society president, a salesman, a student. Service takes time. Inevitably there are conflicts. But the secret of better performance in one area may not necessarily be at the expense of another. The Lord did not intend that we be at ease in Zion (see 2 Nephi 28:24). He intended that all things be done in “wisdom and order” (Mosiah 4:27).

A balance must be struck. Proper balance usually does not mean that we go down one road as far as we can go to the exclusion of all other roads. Rather it is to go down as many roads as necessary, and not more, no further than we must, in order not to impede our progress on other paths which our Father also expects us to walk. But which paths should we walk—and how far? When should we begin—and where? And how can we be sure that, among the many ways we have chosen, our way, the course of our life, is pleasing to the Lord?

Thomas Griffith, a contributing editor for *Time* magazine, once summarized the problem this way. As a young man, he said,

I thought myself happy at the time, my head full of every popular song that came along, the future before me. I could be an artist, a great novelist, an architect, a senator, a singer: having no demonstrable capacity for any of these pursuits made them all appear equally possible to me. All that mattered, I felt, was my inclination; I saw life as a set of free choices. Only later did it occur to me that every road taken is another untaken, every choice a narrowing. A sadder maturity convinces me that, as in a chess game, every move helps commit one to the next, and each person's situation at a given moment is the sum of the moves he has made before.

[Thomas Griffith, *The Waist-high Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 17]

If this is so, and it is, then it becomes urgently important, as Elder Richard L. Evans used to say, that we be “where we ought to be, when we ought to be there,” and that we be “doing what we should do when it ought to be done.” For we will be judged by the choices we have made, and the balance we have struck becomes what we are.

It is noteworthy to me that as Socrates sought the solution to this problem, he asked whether the ability to judge correctly the right road, when he has never been there and doesn’t know it, could ever be acquired by man. He determined that the gift of always making wise choices was beyond *mortal* ability to obtain. It could not be purchased, learned, or acquired by nature. “Whosoever has it gets it by divine dispensation,” he said (see Plato, *Meno* [New York: Penguin Books, 1956], pp. 153–57).

Isn’t that interesting? One of the world’s reputedly wisest men, when face to face with the question of how to get from where he was to where he knew he should be, threw in the towel. The ability to wisely walk *that* road, he sadly concluded, had to come by divine dispensation and not by man’s own intellect or will.

What Is the Answer?

Now that you have the problem, what is the answer? Can we, as Latter-day Saints, expect to fare any better as we make decisions or attempt to find balance in our lives? As a humble servant of the Lord, I testify that we can. Let me tell you why.

At the conclusion of the first day of the Savior’s ministry among the Nephites, he taught them to pray:

Ye must always pray unto the Father in my name.

And whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, which is right, believing that ye shall receive, behold it shall be given unto you. [3 Nephi 18:19–20]

I have often thought that this occasion was the greatest teaching moment in the recorded history of the world. The Nephites had only recently experienced the destruction of their cities, the death of loved ones, the separation of families, and the loss of homes and worldly possessions. They had survived turmoil and horror. They had known three days of total, impenetrable darkness. Of all the peoples on earth, they had much to pray for.

Then they heard a voice from heaven and saw the Son of Man descend from the sky. They heard him speak to them. Every word that he said must have been permanently engraved upon their hearts. Under these circumstances, Jesus Christ promised them that whatever they should ask the Father which was right would be given unto them. They remembered that after he departed from them and ascended into heaven. The scripture records that they dispersed. What they had seen and heard was noised abroad among the people before it was yet dark. Many people labored all the night that they might bring others to be on the morrow in the place where Jesus should show himself.

The Holy Ghost Shows the Way

And when the morrow came, the Twelve who had been chosen to lead the people caused them to kneel on the face of the earth and pray as they had been taught the day before. Of one mind they prayed to the Father in the name of Jesus. Remembering his promise, they asked for that which they most desired. And of all the things that they could have prayed for, the restoration of health, of homes, the reuniting of loved ones, the healing of the sick and the wounded, their leaders, their enemies—what was it they asked for? The scripture says

simply: "They desired that the Holy Ghost should be given to them" (3 Nephi 19:9).

The Nephites undoubtedly had in mind the teachings of Nephi himself when he explained the function and purpose of the Holy Ghost. He had asked:

And now, my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path [which is to enter the Church by baptism and receive a remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Ghost], I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay. . . .

. . . Ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life.

And then he added, most significantly, I believe:

Behold, again I say unto you that if ye will enter in by the way, and receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all things what ye should do. [2 Nephi 31:19, 20; 32:5, emphasis added]

Is it any wonder then, that the Nephites wanted above everything else the Holy Ghost? For without him and the ability to know all things whatsoever they should do, they had no hope of returning to their Father; they had no hope of successfully making right choices which would lead them to happiness and eternal life. They knew this elusive gift was the Holy Ghost.

The Nephites, after one day with the Savior, understood perhaps better than we the terms of their probation. They comprehended the necessity of divine intervention in their lives to assist them in finding their way home.

Much mention is made of the gift of the Holy Ghost in the Church. Each of us who has been baptized has this gift. Collectively,

and individually if we are worthy, it sets us apart and makes us different from all other people on the face of the earth. That statement may sound arrogant or presumptuous to some. I intend no offense. But either the gift means something, or it does not. And if it does, we might best discover what it means lest we find ourselves grouped with the man which had received one talent, and, being afraid to use it, went and hid it in the earth (see Matthew 25:14–29).

No Need to Look Back

It is difficult for me to illustrate this principle, not because I do not know the Holy Ghost, but because most of my encounters with him are too personal to recount here. Nevertheless, let me try to show you how the Holy Ghost has operated in my life, how he may operate in yours, and how we are unlike other people as a result.

A good number of years ago I found myself on a bus. The bus was loaded with young men from all over the country. We were arriving at Castle Air Force Base in California to attend summer camp. We were cadets aspiring to be commissioned second lieutenants in the United States Air Force. As the bus entered the field, we got off and were met by a regular air force captain who assembled us in companies on the parade ground. Suitcases, duffel bags, and civilian clothes were everywhere. We were given directions to the barracks and the commissary. We were told to report in dress uniform at two o'clock that afternoon on the parade ground. I was assigned to lead the first company away.

It was an interesting summer. We spent much time in the classroom, some on the firing line, and some in the air. Each week there was a rotation of assignments; we all drew our fair share of disagreeable duty, and each week cadet officers were appointed to participate in special leadership training programs and to direct the lives of the rest of us.

As the summer wore on, I became aware that I had not received a leadership assignment. As camp drew to an end and the last duty rosters were posted, I noticed that I had been over-looked as a cadet commander. Knowing that my success or failure in the air force depended in part on how well I performed in this capacity, I asked for and received an appointment with the officer in charge of the camp.

At the proper hour, I presented myself at his office. I saluted. When asked what I wanted to discuss, I told him that I had noticed a mistake in the duty roster, and that I had not been given the rotating assignment of cadet commander. Without even looking up from his desk, the captain told me that he knew that, that he had already decided that I had no future in the air force. As I started to protest, he said, “You remember the day that you got off the bus? I asked you to march the men to the barracks. As I watched you, I knew that you did not have what it takes to be an officer in the air force. The duty roster stands. You are dismissed.”

A flood of thoughts came to my mind. Years of preparation were suddenly of no avail. The course of my life hung in the balance. I turned to leave. There was a silent prayer in my heart. More of a question than a prayer, really. “Did I come this far to fail?” I asked. I found myself immobilized in front of the captain’s desk. I struggled for words. My career was important to me. To my surprise, I clicked my heels together, saluted smartly, and, without having taken thought of what I should say, I said, “Begging the captain’s pardon, sir, but I was under the impression that we were going to be graded by what we learned while we were here, and not by what we knew when we came.”

Now you don’t talk that way to regular air force officers. There was no precedent for what I did or said. At the time I didn’t know from what source came the courage for the words. But I do know that I was at a crossroads.

My future activities and associates would be different, depending upon what happened at that moment. My temptations and trials would be different, depending upon what happened at that moment. I would be an enlisted man or an officer, depending on what happened at that moment. The course of my life hung in the balance, as it so often does on seemingly little things.

The captain got up from his desk; he nearly bit his cigar in two. He was obviously unaccustomed to that kind of insubordination. He walked around to where I stood. He looked at my shoes, he looked at my uniform, he looked at my double chin as I held myself at strict military attention. For at least five minutes, although it seemed much longer, he circled me time after time. I stood there not knowing what else to do. Finally he said, “I might have been wrong about you. Maybe you do have what it takes to be an officer in this man’s air force. We’ll change the duty roster; you can command your company during the last week’s activities. We’ll see what you can do.”

Do I believe that the Holy Ghost prompted me in what I said and did that day? Yes, I do. Could not someone else, a non-Latter-day Saint perhaps, have said the same things, or something better, so as to achieve the same result? I don’t know. What I do know is that for me, in that moment, in that place, what I said and did was right. Someone else may have been more articulate; someone else may not have gotten into the difficulty in the first place. Others may have turned on their heels and left upon being informed of the captain’s displeasure. The course of their lives would have been different had they done so.

I have never looked back on that incident. I am certain that what happened was right. I have no regrets, nor have I ever given more than passing thought to what might have become of me had I left the office and the air force at that moment.

I know that one of our greatest blessings as Latter-day Saints is that *we* need never look back. We need never ask what might have been. Should I have dropped out of school or struggled to get my degree? Should I have married Sally instead of the girl I did marry? What if I had taken that job in the East instead of teaching school?

We Can Know beyond Doubt

If we have been worthy, and if we have followed the guidance of the Spirit as manifested in the feelings of our hearts, then we can know beyond doubt that what is done was best. We can be certain, although there may have been trials, or we may be having difficulties, that we are where the Lord would have us be. We will know that, although the grass may seem greener elsewhere, our decision to enter the pasture we are in was prompted and purposeful and preparatory.

Knowing these things and knowing that for the most part we have done what the Lord wanted done can bring peace and joy beyond expression. No other people on earth can ever have *this* blessing, for it comes from having the companionship of the Holy Spirit.

As I have better understood my relationship with the Holy Ghost, I have come to know—

- what it is to unexpectedly change airplanes in a distant city only to find after arriving home that a scheduled flight has been indefinitely delayed.
- what it is to begin a missionary interview with the question, never asked before or since, “Elder, who have you been fighting with,” and to hear the astonished reply, “President, how did you know?”
- what it is to pay a surprise visit to a distant city and to hear someone say, “I have been praying for days that you would come.”

Occasionally, I have had time to pray and ponder before acting on the promptings of the Comforter. More often I have found myself as Nephi, “led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do” (1 Nephi 4:6).

The Lord told Joseph and Oliver, “It shall be given thee in the very moment what thou shalt speak and write” (D&C 24:6)

To Thomas B. Marsh he said, “Go your way whithersoever I will, and it shall be given you by the Comforter what you shall do and whither you shall go” (D&C 31:11).

What to say! What to write! Where to go! What to do! Such guidance, if given infrequently for only some of life’s decisions, would be priceless. But the broader promise was given to the Prophet Joseph at Salem, Massachusetts, that “for the main,” (or for the most part) the place he should tarry would be signaled to him by the peace and power of the Spirit (see D&C 111:8). And the Three Witnesses were told that the Holy Ghost would manifest “all things which are expedient unto the children of men” (D&C 18:18).

This is of monumental significance. It is then easier to understand why President Marion G. Romney in the April conference of 1974 said, “The importance of receiving the Holy Ghost is beyond expression.” But beyond expression must not mean beyond reverent thankfulness or beyond understanding. The world may not comprehend that the Holy Ghost manifests the “truth of all things” (Moroni 10:5). We know that he does.

The Lord told the Prophet Joseph Smith,

God shall give unto you knowledge by his Holy Spirit, yea, by the unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost, that has not been revealed since the world was until now;

Which our forefathers have awaited with anxious expectation to be revealed in the last times, which their minds were pointed to by the angels,

as held in reserve for the fullness of their glory.
[D&C 121:26–27]

The gift has been given—what we make of it is up to us. Unless we listen to counsel, we will receive none. Unless we pray, exercise faith, love, obey, and keep the tabernacles of

our spirits clean—we can have no claim upon this unspeakable gift.

May we so live as to have the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help us make wise decisions at those moments in every day when we apply what we know in such a way as to be judged by what we do, I pray humbly, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.