

“They Shall Ask the Way to Zion” (Jeremiah 50:5)

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If there is one thing that distinguishes the University from other institutions of learning, it is the expectation to advance knowledge. The mission of most educational institutions is to pass on what is already known. Our high school teachers distilled their lessons from books that had already been written. At the university we engage in this dissemination too, but we have the further obligation to add to the bank of human knowledge by asking new questions or using new sources and methods to find better answers to old questions. Increasingly, through programs such as mentored learning, rather than just giving students the answers to the questions that have already been asked, we are inviting you to join us in the asking of the questions. We want you to experience the university as a place to actively pursue knowledge rather than only passively acquire it.

Justly or not, we often credit the Greeks for this inquisitive approach to the world. They did invent *historia*, a word that for them had a more encompassing meaning than the word *history* has for us today. For the Greeks, history meant knowledge, but only of a particular kind: history was any knowledge that had been acquired through inquiry, by asking questions. This was a significant development that

made the Greeks among the most learned of cultures in multiple fields. When Herodotus, who we like to call the first historian, wrote *The Histories*, also called *The Inquiries*, of the origins of the Greco-Persian wars and of the cultures of the Near East, he did so based not on hearsay, rumor, and prejudice, which had been the common practice, but by asking lots of questions and engaging in extensive travel in the places he wrote about. He did not always get the facts right, but what is important is that he made every effort—by careful and persistent questioning—to get them right.

Today I'd like to address the value and practice of learning, particularly learning by asking questions. Of all the lessons Christ taught in the Sermon on the Mount, the counsel “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find”¹ is among the most cited in later scripture. What is the import of that exhortation for those of us who should be engaged in the pursuit of secular knowledge, eternal truths, and personal virtues?

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Most of what you and I know we picked up passively: in conversations overheard, from unsolicited lectures from our parents, from TV productions, and in casual reading. In other words, most of what I know came to me without my seeking it, without my asking questions that led to new knowledge, and hence that knowledge doesn't qualify as "history" by the Greek definition. There is nothing at all wrong with passive learning; it will forever be an essential means of both cultural and academic transmission. As a professional student, I have sat through what must be hundreds of hours of lectures, and I have learned a great deal. As a member of the Church, I've sat through yet many more hours of meetings filled with lessons, talks, and testimonies. The lecture remains one of the most efficient methods of teaching that by itself can inform, entertain, inspire, and convert. Herodotus' *Inquiries* were first published in lectures; general conference is a weekend marathon of lecturing; and Christ lectured frequently, including at the Sermon on the Mount. However, while showing up is essential (it was Paul after all who said that "faith cometh by hearing"²), it is probably insufficient if we are to fully keep the commandment we have been given to seek learning—whether by study or by faith.³

The Lord has given us a heavy homework assignment for this life, one so large as to seem overwhelming. We have been instructed to learn

*of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad.*⁴

And also we are

*to obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God and man.*⁵

Brigham Young, who was largely self-schooled, taught repeatedly that "the object of existence is to learn."⁶ Elsewhere President Young described converted Church members as having a fervor for learning. He wrote that "the religion embraced by the Latter-day Saints, if only slightly understood, prompts them to search diligently after knowledge. There is no other people in existence more eager to see, hear, learn, and understand truth."⁷

How eager are we to actively seek knowledge? Curiosity should be a palpable trait in the children of an all-knowing Father. In our efforts to become like Him, we must advance in knowledge; as Elder Jeffrey R. Holland put it when he was president of this university: "God's glory is his intelligence, and . . . it is to be our glory as well."⁸ If God knows all things and we are to be like Him, learning is not just a recommendation but also an essential trait of those who seek eternal life.

I find, however, that we often resist knowledge. Part of it is simple indolence. Learning is hard work that requires substantial effort and time that I am sometimes reluctant to invest. And if your mind tends toward wandering, like mine, even listening passively can be something of a challenge. The challenge increases if we invite distractions. A few years ago I sat in the back of one of our classrooms and was surprised by the number of students fully engaged with their glowing laptops in e-mail, Facebook, solitaire, and shopping—what we might call a passive resistance to passive learning. If passive learning takes effort and attention, active learning, where we ask questions of our own creation and pursue answers with our own research, imposes far greater demands on our powers of concentration.

We may also resist knowledge because, out of hand, we judge it to be of little value or even dismiss it as erroneous. All knowledge is not of equal value to us, but much of what we can learn has great value, and it is not in our

best interest to summarily dismiss the chance of learning something new. God knows all things, both true and false. He knows all the philosophies of men in addition to the truths of the eternities. Be open-minded. It is good that a biology major knows some history and that a history major knows some botany. It is good that an accountant knows how to cook and that a cook knows how to keep accounts. This is why general education is such an important component of this university. To know something of chemistry, economics, history, languages, literature, and physics is to gain in intelligence and become more like our Father, and this knowledge will boost our abilities to serve our families and build the kingdom.

I strongly agree that there are no stupid questions; but there are some sterile questions. One of the least fruitful is “Is this going to be on the test?” because it is usually asked to limit the bounds of our responsibility toward knowledge. It serves the same purpose as the question “Who is my neighbor?” The lawyer who directed that question to Jesus sought to limit the boundaries of those he would love. Christ’s response was a startling parable, the Good Samaritan, followed by an unexpected question. The question Jesus put to the lawyer wasn’t “Who is your neighbor?” but “Who was neighbor to this man?” that is, to the man bleeding on the side of the road. The question was an instructive turn of the tables that showed that the term *neighbor* was not at all a definition of others, as the lawyer had desired, but a definition of ourselves. The question we should ask is not “Who is my neighbor?” but “Am I a neighbor?” It is a question of identity, not categorization. When we try to limit the bounds of our knowledge with questions like “Is this going to be on the test?” we might contemplate the question “Who knows all things?” If God knows all things, and we are to be like Him, we should make an effort to embrace useful knowledge rather than look for reasons to pass it by.

When I was an undergraduate, there were a number of classes I refused to take, and there were a few I did take in which my heart waxed hard or my ears grew dull of hearing. I deemed the content of those classes boring, useless, or trivial. I look back on them as lost opportunities. Fortunately, there were many other courses in which I did see value and from which I did benefit. One of the first classes I took out of high school, at a local community college, was an introduction to anthropology. We read book after book on exotic cultures that did appalling things from the point of view of a little-traveled freshman. The professor taught me that it was more important to understand than it was to judge, because fair judgment could only come from understanding. Soon thereafter, I was sent on a mission to an exotic place and was a better prepared representative of the gospel for having taken the course. My first semester at BYU, I took Biology 100. I was fascinated by the recent research our professors shared on human genetics. We were, in essence, examining the blueprints of the human body, an eternal entity made expressly in God’s image. My second semester I took a course in astronomy. At times during the course, I got a narrow glimpse of worlds created without end, of the incomprehensible scale of God’s glory, and of my own nothingness. I took a course in family history that taught me something about who I was and where I came from. The knowledge I gained turned my heart to fathers and mothers I had never met but to whom I owed much. These subjects changed me.

Increasing our vocabularies is one area in which we should take greater interest. All knowledge, as far as I know, is conveyed by the medium of language, and our mastery of a language’s components, its words, will decide to a great extent what we can understand and what we can teach. There may be no greater barrier to learning than a small vocabulary. There are about 50,000 word families in the

English language. Five-year-old children can have vocabularies of about 5,000 words, which is pretty good, as this accounts for 90 percent of all spoken words, although a much smaller fraction of the written word. Students of foreign languages, even after six years of instruction, average vocabularies of less than 3,500 words, suggesting the difficulty of all language acquisition. As children in school we can learn thousands of new words each year, as many as eight per day, and by the time we graduate from college we may know some 20,000 words. Most of us, however, plateau at that point, largely because we stop reading, and we could learn a lot more at every stage of our lives if we inquired about the unfamiliar words we read and hear each day. Write them down, look them up, raise your hand. Asking “What does that word mean?” raises a fertile question indeed. Every word you learn can open up a new little world. You may begin to see that word everywhere, even though previously you had never noticed it, and someday it will roll glibly off your tongue or purposefully off your pen, thus making the full transition from passive incomprehension to deliberate deployment.

The beauty of knowledge is that understanding brings joy, appreciation, power, and even comfort. Simply learning a little history at home or abroad will peel back the layers of our unawareness, change the way we see the world and others, and heighten our ability to enjoy them. I can think of many personal examples, but I’ll share a recent one. One student in my environmental history course wrote an enlightening paper on the history of human burial in the United States. She addressed the following questions: “How have Americans buried their dead?” “How has that changed?” and “What role has the environmental movement played in recent burial alternatives?” Embalming became a common practice as a result of the Civil War, and by the early 20th century, undertakers marketed numerous services to

grieving families. She found one advertisement from 1920 that offered, for \$1, to compose the deceased’s facial features, which probably meant to seal the eyes and mouth closed; for \$2 the undertaker would give the face a look of quiet resignation; and for \$5 he could give the countenance “the appearance of Christian hope and contentment.”⁹ The paper opened my eyes, sparked my curiosity, and I did some further reading based on her bibliography. Death is something we will all face, and we will probably face it many times in our lives as loved ones pass on. How we care for our dead is a question worth asking. I have found the funerals of some loved ones more alienating than soothing, and learning of the history of burial answered in part why that is the case, at least for me. Just a little knowledge has been a great comfort, and it has also changed the way I look at even the landscapes around me, something I would not have predicted.

Seeking knowledge also can be an effective antidote to worldliness. We invest a great deal in the acquisition of stuff. Companies bombard us with slick, relentless propaganda as to why we must have their stuff, and we judge an individual’s success by their stuff’s sheer quantity and supposed quality. I like stuff—I especially like the word *stuff*. But consumption never was creativity. It brings few lasting satisfactions and can bring burdensome debts. Stuff beyond our basic needs does not liberate. Consider the overall investment of your time. You have to shop for stuff. You have to clean, maintain, and organize stuff. You lose stuff. You look for stuff. You polish stuff, secure it against theft, trip over it, recharge it, upgrade it, accessorize it, pack it, move it, unpack it, insure it, fix it, and eventually sell, trash, or bequeath it. Stuff has no use beyond this life, and it takes a lot from us.

Very much unlike stuff, knowledge has few such liabilities. Knowledge does not depreciate but grows deeper, stronger, and more valuable with each use. Unlike stuff, knowledge

has neither mass nor volume and does not take up any space outside the bounds of our cranium. Unlike in the accumulation of stuff, in getting knowledge you will never have to build a three-car garage on the side of your head. Your mind has no upper limit of mega-, giga-, or terabytes. Some estimate that the Internet, the space that increasingly serves as my mental three-car garage, has a total size of 5 billion gigabytes, but even this amounts to a fraction of what our minds are capable. Also unlike stuff, knowledge can be given to others without diminishing our stock. In fact, sharing knowledge tends to better burnish it in the giver's mind.

Best of all, knowledge you can take with you. What you learn, unlike what you buy, will pass with you from this life to the next. You cannot take your advanced degrees, professional awards, job titles, or even your Boy Scout merit badges, but you will take everything you've learned in acquiring them. Of course, in this life, as Alfred North Whitehead wrote, "Knowledge does not keep any better than fish."¹⁰ We forget so readily. I am sometimes discouraged by my feeble memory. Why read that book when I'm going to forget 95 percent of the content within the year, which will probably include the author's name and the book's title? When I was a student I wondered why I should memorize Latin conjugations when they would slip away soon after the final exam, if not just before it. However, we should not despair because our mortal bodies are imperfect. I believe we will take all our knowledge with us when we go to the other side, even that which we've lost due to the limits of mortal faculties and the aging process. Whatever function our brains provide, the knowledge we acquire in this life will go with our spirits and eventually be reunited with our immortal bodies. At judgment day we are told we will have a perfect recollection of all we did, good or ill.¹¹ We probably retain more than we think. Much of what we forget can

come rushing back when circumstances call on it. The Holy Ghost has the power to bring all things to our remembrance despite our mortal, cerebral imperfections.¹² But we can't remember what we didn't take the time to learn in the first place. Every forgetting has the possibility of remembering. Ignorance, on the other hand, has unlimited impossibilities. And not only can we take what we've learned with us, we have been promised that it will advantage us in the next life.¹³ That makes knowledge a pretty good long-term investment in contrast to the time we devote to consumer goods. Is it a wonder a wise man once said, "How much better is it to get wisdom than gold! and to get understanding . . . than silver!"¹⁴ Seeking knowledge is a distinct way of laying up treasures in heaven rather than on earth.

One of the central skills university students should acquire is the ability to ask useful questions to seek new knowledge, and in my experience that seems to be one of the most difficult aptitudes to develop in my students. I was certainly deficient in that skill when I was a student. Each field across the breadth of the arts, sciences, and administration goes about asking questions and advancing knowledge in different ways, but there are many parallels. On the first day of my first graduate history seminar, my advisor handed each of us a pile of primary source documents, all Jesuit letters written in 16th-century Portuguese, and said, "Come back in two weeks with an original paper based only on these sources." My selection was a long treatise on Brazil's tropical animals, most of them biting, venomous, and dangerous. I enjoyed it immensely. I was proud I could read it at all, considering the document's age and difficult handwriting. I read it twice, I read it three times, but I still didn't know what to do with it. I brought my creative block to my advisor, and he gave me the kind look that said, "You are probably not going to make it here, young man." He suggested a simple question: "What are this Jesuit's attitudes

toward nature?" Lights went on, bells rang. In part, I already knew the answer. But with that question in mind, I read it again and saw so much more than I could in the previous readings. I could not see what I was not looking for. I did not receive knowledge, because I had not asked. But then, in relatively short order, I wrote a lovely little paper. My advisor liked it, but both he and I knew that paper was not mine. The research was mine and the writing was mine, but the conception was his, and in academia, creativity is the essential aptitude. I made it through graduate school because I learned to ask my own questions. I have gotten better at it over the years, but it is still the hardest thing I do in my research.

Learning to ask questions in the academic setting of the university is a useful skill, but one cannot acquire it in passive effort. Your success in a career, a business, and even the home will be shaped as much by the knowledge you can create as by the knowledge you have already acquired. Knowledge and experience are to be enhanced by the rarer traits of creativity and inquiry. Ultimately, a university education should teach you how to ask, think, and gain new knowledge. One should be able to look at a problem, a spreadsheet, a business plan, a blueprint, or a medical condition and, with effort, see things not at all obvious to the passive observer. Again, what should make you unique as a university graduate is not just what you know but what you will know.

I believe it is similar in the gospel. There are questions, what we might call saving questions, that we all must ask, and only we can ask them. Church leaders, scriptures, good books, and good friends might help point us in the right direction, but we must seek the essential truths of the gospel on our own initiative. Elder David A. Bednar notes that this kind of learning, by faith,

requires spiritual, mental, and physical exertion and not just passive reception. . . .

. . . [It] reaches far beyond mere cognitive comprehension and the retaining and recalling of information. . . . Learning by faith cannot be transferred from an instructor to a student through a lecture, a demonstration, or [even] an experiential exercise; rather, a student must exercise faith and act in order to obtain the knowledge for himself or herself.¹⁵

Of course, you do not need a university education to engage in this kind of learning, but learning by study and by faith are in the same spirit. Hence, it is important to learn how to ask questions because there is knowledge, saving knowledge, that you cannot find but by asking.

What are these questions of faith and salvation? Some of them are epistemological, that is, they seek to know what is true and lead inevitably, if asked sincerely, to the gift of a testimony. The questions of testimony we must ask are: Is there a God? Where do I find salvation? Is Christ my Savior? Is the Book of Mormon true? Did Joseph Smith restore Christ's church and priesthood?

There is another set of questions that are ontological, that is, that seek to answer questions of identity and being. Some questions of identity are: Who am I? Am I good? Am I right before the Lord? Who should I become, and how do I get there? Am I forgiven of my sins? These two lines of questioning Elder Holland has reduced to the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of virtue, and both of these lines of questioning are of great importance to our salvation.¹⁶

Joseph Smith, who is among the greatest of inquisitors, serves as a wonderful model for us. He received revelation upon revelation, not as bolts out of the blue while he was minding his own business, but because he asked God question upon question. So much of the Restoration was based upon questions Joseph asked. When Joseph set off for the Sacred Grove, he had these two questions in mind, one seeking truth

and one seeking virtue. We tend to emphasize the former, because the answer to his question about which church was true, about where he could find salvation, has universal application. But Joseph had another question, which he emphasized in his 1832 account, which was whether or not he could be forgiven of his sins. Joseph sought not only to be right but also to be righteous. When Joseph received his first visit from Moroni, it was also in answer to a prayer for forgiveness, “that I might know my state and standing before [God.]”¹⁷

So in addition to going to God with questions whose answers will bless us with a testimony, we need to consistently ask questions that will develop our virtue and inform us of our moral identity. An essential element of this earthly life is to discover who you truly are, your divine self. That should be an exciting process, the ultimate novel in which each day of life another page is turned and every ending is a cliff-hanger. Too many are under the mistaken impression that as we become good we become boring, that heaven will be full of people who all think and dress and act exactly alike. Even Tolstoy in the first line of *Anna Karenina* writes, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” as if there were diversity only in misery. I couldn’t disagree more. In my experience it is the unhappy that are all the same. They are sullen, bitter, argumentative, and disheartened, all of which can make for great drama, but most of which work to effectively smother any discernible personality trait under dark moods. Happy people, on the other hand, tend to become distinct individuals, unique maybe in all the eternities. The miserable people I know are all the same, regardless of cause. The good people I know well, many of them my students who are apparently well along in the process of becoming who they truly are, stand out to me distinctly, and it is a pleasure to know them, to see their divine self peeking through. This is an exciting process you work out between

yourself and Heavenly Father, daily, in prayer and repentance. Ask: “Who am I, really?” and “How do I get there?”

In all your asking, come to the Lord with humility and sincerity. These two things are key to learning both secular and spiritual knowledge. At the outset of an academic study or at the beginning of a prayer, we should be able to sincerely say three hard words: “*I don’t know.*” And we must be prepared for unexpected answers, not simply look to confirm what we think we already know about the world or what we want to believe about ourselves. The rich young man who came running to Christ, to ask on his knees what he needed to do to have eternal life, may have been neither humble nor sincere. He may have only wanted to justify himself, to declare, like the Zoramites, how much better he was than average already. Jesus loved him anyway and gave him a direct answer. But it was not the answer the young man expected or wanted. It was a lost opportunity—to arrive at the door, to knock, and to be welcomed inside, to “come and follow me,” only to turn away because the answer is not what we were looking for.

The divine attributes we are trying to acquire in this life are as much about knowing as they are about doing. Becoming new creatures requires knowing new things. Truth and virtue, of course, are related. As we strive to keep commandments, we come to understand better why we keep them, not just in an academic sense, but in our very hearts and beings. This is important knowledge. In an 1852 epistle, the First Presidency wrote:

*That man who does the best he knows how to-day, should so continue to live in the exercise of faith and intelligence . . . so as to be better and more useful to-morrow. . . . Strive to know what God knows, and use that knowledge as God uses it, and then you will be like him; will see as you are seen, and know as you are known; and have charity, love one another, and do each other good continually.*¹⁸

In other words, charity, something Moroni specifically instructs us to ask for, is to know our brothers and sisters in the same way Christ knows them—precious knowledge indeed.

When our faith leads to repentance, God will give us understanding line upon line, precept upon precept, and to those who receive, He gives more.¹⁹ Thus it is that we grow from grace to grace. Knowing is becoming.

There is so much to learn. So be curious. Keep your sense of wonder about the world. Learn the names of the trees, flowers, and birds around you. Adam made the effort to name them; take the time to learn them. Show up for class—and ask questions. Can I just insert that nothing saves the professor struggling in front of a class better than a student with a sincere, thoughtful question. Show up for personal prayer—and ask questions. Read a good newspaper regularly. Save a little money by buying less stuff so you can travel a bit. Keep a good book or two on your nightstand and in your carry-on luggage. Be curious, like Joseph Smith, about your own salvation. Ask for forgiveness, the sweetest knowledge we can find. Inquire, as did Enos, after the salvation of others. We have been given a great promise over and over again. Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Matthew 7:7; see also D&C 4:7.
2. Romans 10:17.
3. D&C 109:7.
4. D&C 88:79.
5. D&C 93:53.
6. *JD* 9:167.
7. *JD* 8:6.
8. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Who We Are and What God Expects Us to Do,” BYU devotional, 15 September 1987.
9. In Lauren Kohls, “Dying in America Since the Twentieth Century,” paper submitted for the course “Nature and History: The Earth’s Environmental Past,” Brigham Young University Provo, Utah, 1 April 2010, 2–3.
10. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education, and other Essays* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 98.
11. Nephi 9:13–14.
12. John 14:26.
13. D&C 130:18–19.
14. Proverbs 16:16.
15. David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith,” *Ensign*, September 2007, 64.
16. See Jeffrey R. Holland, “Who We Are.”
17. Joseph Smith—History 1:29.
18. “Sixth General Epistle of the Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Millennial Star* 14(2): 15 January 1852, 22.
19. 2 Nephi 28:30.