

On the Measurements We Make in Life

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I am grateful for the opportunity to be here with you today. I am particularly grateful that my family, immediate and extended, can be here to support me.

Upon finding out that I was going to have this opportunity to share this devotional with you today, a colleague quipped, “Aw, don’t worry. It’s just like holding a big family home evening.”

If this suggestion my colleague gave resembles family home evenings at the Reese household, then that means (1) most of you are sitting here against your will, (2) some of you will spend the entire time texting your friends about what you are going to do tonight, and (3) all of you realized that once that amazing musical number at the beginning of this devotional was over, it was all downhill from there! Of course, the most disappointing difference between this devotional and a big FHE is that nobody was put in charge of refreshments!

I appreciate your willingness to be here today. I pray that our Father in Heaven will bless our time together with an abundance of the Holy Ghost. I was taught once that the most important aspects of a meeting are, in order of least to most important, what the speaker has to say, what the Spirit teaches you,

and what commitments you make. The god-like changes to our patterns of living are what define our character, celestial or otherwise. That we can leave here today with an increased desire to change some aspect of our lives is my hope and prayer.

A common question when meeting new people is, “What do you do for a living?” When I tell people I’m a statistician, their first response is, “Oh, that was the *worst* class I had in college.” I don’t even know how to appropriately respond to that comment. The second response I commonly get when asked about my profession is, “Why would *anyone* ever go into that field?” This is the question I get excited to answer. I get downright giddy when I get the chance to describe why I chose statistics as my profession.

The most compelling aspect about statistics that drew me in from the start is the role of statistics as sort of a gatekeeper of science. We are all familiar with the pattern of learning using the scientific method, which is to first formulate a hypothesis, then gather data

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through scientific experimentation, and then draw conclusions based on the data gathered. Statistics is concerned with making proper measurements, weighing the evidence in favor of, or against, the hypothesis, and then helping formulate proper conclusions. This process of making proper measurements and then summarizing the evidence is a powerful process that has helped push science forward.

Today I would like to focus on the measurements we must all make as part of our mortal existence and the role those measurements play as we form judgments. While there are many areas of our lives in which proper measurement is important, my focus today will be about measurements we make about ourselves and measurements we make about others. Like many aspects of our mortal existence, our ability to make good measurements requires practice and development of skills—both of which require time. I am optimistic that with some practice and skill development, we can all be better at the measurements we must inevitably make in this life.

Learning to Measure on the Lord’s System and Timescale

Before I discuss principles of good measurement and apply them to our measurements of ourselves and of others, I would like to share an experience my wife and I had with making measurements and some of the lessons we learned in the process.

Early in my BYU career, while sitting in my office, the phone rang, and on the other line was someone I both admired and respected. He indicated that his organization, a National Football League team, had a job opportunity for me. One of my passions is the development of statistical methods for sports and human performance, so it was a job that I had dreamed about, and it was also both professionally rewarding and financially attractive. Indeed, this was a job that I felt completely prepared for, and all of the details seemed

to point me in the direction of accepting the position. My wife, Wendy, and I discussed the job opportunity and felt that we should at the very least explore the possibility. We made all the arrangements to fly to the destination city. After a three-day, somewhat grueling experience with high-powered executives, we returned home with far more questions than we had answers.

With the offer in hand, my wife and I weighed the evidence we had gathered over the three-day trip by creating a pros and cons list. We were meticulous about making our list. Our measurement of the pros included financial considerations, opportunities to meet new people, and job-growth opportunities. Our measurement of the cons included moving away from family, the inability to teach amazing students, and no longer working with valued colleagues at BYU. As the day came for us to report our decision, Wendy and I gathered at the door as I prepared to leave for work. We had been praying, fasting, and gathering all the data we could gather, and there we were with lists of pros and cons that were identically long and equally compelling. It appeared to be a statistical tie. We were both exhausted by the process of deciding, so I suggested that the optimal way to make a decision in the case of a statistical tie was—yep, you guessed it—to toss a coin!

While I fully expected my wife to remind me that not everything had to be decided using optimal decision theory and that this really was one more piece of evidence suggesting that I was as nerdy as my profession suggested I was, I was shocked to hear her say, “Okay.” She quickly grabbed a coin from the telephone stand by our back door and flipped it. I just as quickly grabbed the coin out of the air and said, “Okay, but none of this best-out-of-three business—one flip of the coin! Heads, we go. Tails, we stay.” She agreed, and I flipped the coin. I don’t know how many of you have had moments in your life when everything slowed way down, when everything seemed to go in

slow motion. This was one of those moments. I saw every rotation of that coin as it went up and then ever so slowly—flip, flip, flip—headed to the ground. With anxious eyes and nervous hearts, we watched as the coin struck the floor, then hit the back door, then rattled around in a corner near the door, and then came to rest directly vertical against the wall!

Now, I'm a statistician, and I've flipped enough coins to know that this event has zero probability! We laughed (and cried) together as we realized that we weren't going to get off that easily. We had work left to do, and the Lord was not going to allow us to miss out on a growth opportunity. We asked the potential employer for a little more time and had one of the most powerful weeks of our married lives together as a trip to the temple and additional fervent prayer and fasting helped us measure weightier evidence than anything we had on our list. We had a sweet and precious learning experience that the Lord had in store for us—on His timescale.

It is about measuring both on the Lord's measurement system and on the Lord's timescale that I would like to focus the balance of my remarks today.

Measuring Ourselves

Perhaps the most important and difficult measurement we make in mortality is to assess where we stand as individuals. If we do not take the time to assess where we are in our relationship with the Savior, we will likely find ourselves moving backward. The prophet Alma understood the importance of having a personal interview with ourselves and of taking stock of our lives. His teachings are reminiscent of the Apostle Paul's teachings to the Corinthians to "examine yourselves" (2 Corinthians 13:5; see also 1 Corinthians 11:28). As Alma was going through towns and villages teaching the people he met, he encouraged them—and us—to have personal interviews with themselves. He even helped

them with some questions they might ask, and I commend them to you:

And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?

Do ye exercise faith in the redemption of him who created you? Do you look forward with an eye of faith, and view this mortal body raised in immortality, and this corruption raised in incorruption, to stand before God to be judged according to the deeds which have been done in the mortal body? [Alma 5:14–15]

The answers to these questions are among some of the most important you will give in your life. The answers to these questions require honest soul-searching, personal pondering, sincere prayer, and a genuine relationship with the Savior. They require measurements of ourselves that allow us to take stock of where we stand so that we may make progress toward becoming children of Christ. The result is spiritual rebirth, and it is one of the sweetest blessings that our Father in Heaven has granted us in mortality. Of course, the process of making measurements about ourselves is not easy.

As we go through the process of making measurements about ourselves, a critical consideration is to be fair in our assessments. While some who try to make assessments of themselves will not hold themselves to a high enough standard, it is my experience that most are more inclined to be far too tough on themselves. In our quest for perfection, we will almost certainly find that our measurements of ourselves will be found wanting. Indeed, imperfection in this life is a reality. In this regard I am grateful for modern prophets and apostles who understand this reality and have taught us a remedy. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, in his talk "Of Things That Matter Most," taught:

[A] key relationship is with ourselves. It may seem odd to think of having a relationship with ourselves, but we do. Some people can't get along with themselves. They criticize and belittle themselves all day long until they begin to hate themselves. May I suggest that you reduce the rush and take a little extra time to get to know yourself better. Walk in nature, watch a sunrise, enjoy God's creations, ponder the truths of the restored gospel, and find out what they mean for you personally. Learn to see yourself as Heavenly Father sees you—as His precious daughter or son with divine potential. [Ensign, November 2010, 22]

As we make measurements of ourselves, we must be fair. In a generation that is dominated by knee-jerk reactions that can be sent around the globe in microseconds and by the instantaneous measurements that are meted out through social media, we are often lured into making judgments without data. The virtual world that comes with the miracles of technology have a side effect of masking “things as they really are” (Jacob 4:13). Elder David A. Bednar taught the importance of making measurements about ourselves in appropriate ways and not letting the snap judgments of instantaneous response in social media overwhelm us:

Please be careful of becoming so immersed and engrossed in pixels, texting, earbuds, twittering, online social networking, and potentially addictive uses of media and the Internet that you fail to recognize the importance of your physical body and miss the richness of person-to-person communication. Beware of digital displays and data in many forms of computer-mediated interaction that can displace the full range of physical capacity and experience. . . .

Brothers and sisters, please understand. I am not suggesting all technology is inherently bad; it is not. Nor am I saying we should not use its many capabilities in appropriate ways to learn, to communicate, to lift and brighten lives, and to build and

strengthen the Church; of course we should. But I am raising a warning voice that we should not squander and damage authentic relationships by obsessing over contrived ones. [“Things as They Really Are,” Ensign, June 2010, 21, 22]

Making measurements of ourselves is more effective when based on the introspective personal interview suggested by the prophet Alma, on quiet pondering, and on prayerful guidance of the Holy Ghost. Using these methods of measurement will allow us to make fair assessments and will reinforce the eternal truth that we are children of a Father in Heaven who knows and loves us!

Measuring Others

Measuring ourselves requires fairness and honesty. As we move beyond measuring ourselves to measuring others, we must exercise caution, because measuring others requires the additional virtue of patience. Indeed, the folly associated with making poor measurements of others gives rise to the concluding section of the Savior's Sermon on the Mount—the doctrinal foundation for discipleship in the kingdom. Matthew's recollection of the Savior's injunction on proper measurement of others is contained in chapter 7 of his record. The Savior said:

Judge not, that ye be not judged.

For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?

Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye. [Matthew 7:1–5]

Many interpretations of this scripture consider verse 1 in isolation of the entire section of scripture. My interpretation, however, is that verse 1 is a strong reminder that we are *not* to judge until we've mastered the prerequisites to do so. The next four verses are the Savior's teachings on how to make assessments of others more appropriately. In verse 2 we are taught that the quality of our measurements will dictate how we are measured. In other words, if we are harsh or unfair in our assessments of others, that same amount of harshness or unfairness will be meted (or measured) to us in return.

Verses 3 through 5 remind us about the importance of making assessments of ourselves *before* we make assessments of others. Fundamentally, the ability to make proper measurements of others requires us to first measure ourselves, remove the beam of unresolved sin through the miracle of repentance, and then, with the guidance of the Holy Ghost, make measurements. These measurements of others require a gift of the Spirit called discernment. The spiritual gift of discernment is one that we all have in varying degrees and one that can be increased as much as our Father in Heaven will allow if we but seek it out.

Many of us have had the embarrassing and humility-inducing experience of making a snap judgment about another individual based on physical appearance, only to be completely wrong about our knee-jerk or snap judgment. My young family was stranded on a deserted highway between Green River and Moab, Utah, late one wintry night when we were rescued by a kind, generous, and caring soul who didn't look quite like the angels we typically envision. This giant of a man, who wore greasy pants and a dirty flannel shirt and had hands that were rough and scarred from a lifetime of hard work and service, literally saved my young family. He allowed us to borrow his car for the evening so that my wife and I, with our three children in car seats, could drive

to the next town because there were no tow truck drivers available, and we didn't have the money to pay for one even if there had been one available.

A second mistake made by our natural man tendencies in assessing others is on the opposite end of the spectrum. As part of my work in the Young Men organization, I have been working through the Duty to God program. In that program the young men are encouraged to develop a pattern of living in which they learn their duty, make a plan to change some aspect of their lives to fulfill that duty, and then share their experiences with each other. This process of learning, acting, and sharing is a pattern that has made a huge difference in my life as I have used it myself.

Recently I was taking stock of my own life, and I realized that I needed to be better at taking the time to make better and more fair measurements of people around me. As I began working on this goal, I expected the results to be a reminder that I shouldn't rush to judgment about people based on their appearance. However, as is often the case, I was taught in a different, unanticipated way.

Steve is a friend of mine. Steve is one of those people who always has a smile on his face, who has an incredible number of friends, and who seems to have the ability to turn everything he touches into gold. He is one of those people who seems to be the best at everything and makes everything look easy. He's completely and totally infuriating! However, because I had a goal to try to be patient in my measurements before rushing to judgment, I decided I would practice on Steve.

As I began to observe Steve more closely and learn a bit more about him, I realized that he had been struggling with some fairly serious family issues. I also found out that Steve was experiencing some difficult financial woes as a result of some misplaced investments. In fact, Steve, despite appearing totally perfect on the outside, had struggles that were, in many

ways, far more difficult and challenging than any that I had struggled with. In fact, I was just as embarrassed by this snap judgment as I was by the one I made on the lonesome highway in central Utah that cold winter night. Indeed, we are given different trials at different times. Being patient and taking time to make proper measurements of our fellow brothers and sisters before passing judgment is part of what leads us on a path of discipleship rather than on other less straight and less narrow paths.

In conclusion, I pray that we will all be a little more fair in our measurements of ourselves and a little more patient in our measurements of others. As we hone our measurement skills, we will be more like our Savior, we will be more effective instruments in His hands, and we will understand a measure of His love both for us and for our brothers and sisters. I know that God lives and that Jesus is the Christ, and I pray for change in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.