

# Wisdom and Understanding

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**I**t is wonderful with Sister Samuelson to welcome back those who were with us fall semester and also those who have been away for a season on missions, in the military, or elsewhere. We give a special welcome to those of you who are here at BYU for the first time. A very happy and productive new year to all of you!

In a number of settings over the years and reinforced now by my experiences at BYU, it has seemed to me that wisdom and understanding are much rarer traits or talents than are knowledge and impressive mental capacity. It has also become clear that wisdom and understanding are not of the same domain as knowledge and intellectual prowess. Stated another way, we see many examples of bright folks who are not very wise and others with excellent judgment and wisdom who seem to have modest intellectual gifts or limited knowledge.

A corollary observation is that while it is relatively easy for most of us to learn facts or a given body of information, it seems much more difficult to know how to use wisely that which has been learned. In fact, I have wondered if understanding and wisdom are not innate characteristics or limitations like perfect pitch or tone deafness. You have heard basketball coaches state the obvious that “you can’t coach

height.” On the other hand, BYU professor Clayne Robison believes with good reason that almost everyone can learn to sing. Does this also hold true for acquiring wisdom? I think this is a very serious question, and I will return to it momentarily.

As I examine the work, priorities, and performance of universities, including BYU, it seems obvious that major emphasis is usually given to the acquiring of knowledge of theories, things, and facts. This constellation is what we are most successful in measuring at the Testing Center here on campus and also in our classrooms. I believe we do so with some justification because of educational tradition, but also because of doctrinal implications. Let me read some familiar Doctrine and Covenants verses that seem to support this notion:

*And I give unto you a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom.*

*Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand;*

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*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; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms. [D&C 88:77–79]*

Knowledge is essential and it is basic, but by itself it is often not very useful. Likewise, not all knowledge is of equal or lasting importance. For example, we don't have much current demand for the 2004–2005 campus phone book or last year's airline schedules.

To some, knowledge may be synonymous with wisdom, but I hope that we can also appreciate significant differences. All of us know bright people who on occasion do foolish things. I suspect that even the most knowledgeable in our circle can identify silly mistakes they have made. I know that it would take only modest effort for me personally to construct a top-10 list of the dumbest things I have said or done. As we all know, common sense often seems very uncommon!

In dictionaries, in addition to "knowledge," *wisdom* is defined as "insight, good sense, judgment, and a wise attitude or course of action." Likewise, a thesaurus adds synonyms like *discretion, foresight, insight, prudence, reason, sagacity, and sense*.

I hope you will agree with me that wisdom is more than knowledge and that understanding is more than intellect. If this is so, can we really learn or gain wisdom or is wisdom something we are either born with or without?

Not long ago I read again about the gifts of the Spirit in section 46 of the Doctrine and Covenants. A verse struck me in a way that it never had before. In considering the various spiritual gifts given only to some, I read this: "To another is given the word of knowledge, that *all may be taught to be wise* and to have knowledge" (D&C 46:18; emphasis added).

From this brief verse we can learn two very important lessons:

First, that wisdom and knowledge are not necessarily the same, although knowledge seems to be necessary to be wise.

Second, that *all* may be taught to be wise. Not just some may learn to be wise, but everyone can learn wisdom because some have been given the word of knowledge so that they will be able to teach us.

It is my strongly held belief that here at Brigham Young University we are surrounded by those who have the gift of the word of knowledge, and, therefore, each of us can learn wisdom if we do our parts. Just as Professor Robison demonstrates with singing, so might we demonstrate with wisdom if we are willing to pay the price. I am also convinced that the acquisition of wisdom is central to our BYU opportunities and responsibilities.

As there is a doctrinal basis for our quest for knowledge, so is there a doctrinal foundation underlying our search for wisdom that reaches to the very beginnings of the Restoration and long before that. Think of Joseph Smith's earliest experiences. In his youth he witnessed what he described as "an unusual excitement on the subject of religion" (JS—H 1:5). He was interested and concerned, but felt the "great confusion" he observed in others (JS—H 1:6). Some of his family joined one denomination while he felt an inclination to another. He reported that his "mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness" and his "feelings were deep and often poignant," but he was unable "to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong" (JS—H 1:8). Let me now share Joseph's words with which we are so familiar:

*While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: If*

any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. [JS—H 1:11; emphasis in original]

You know the rest of the story. Young Joseph Smith lacked wisdom, and he did what he needed to do to acquire wisdom.

Given its importance, how should we go about gaining wisdom? I believe the pattern is fundamentally the same, although we now have many helps and resources not available to Joseph. We must ask of God. Do we need to do more than ask? If so, what do we need to do and how do we go about doing it?

In the same wonderful section of the Doctrine and Covenants from which I read earlier that provides part of the doctrinal support for our pursuit of knowledge, the Lord said, “Seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). We understand that both study and faith are necessary and that neither is entirely successful when employed alone in our search for wisdom.

Sometimes the wisdom of God comes directly, as with the experience of young Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove or as with the teaching of the Holy Ghost that can come to us when we are spiritually prepared. Sometimes wisdom comes in less direct but unmistakable ways. Listen to these words of President Gordon B. Hinckley:

*God has not left us in ignorance to walk in darkness. His word, spoken both anciently and in our generation, is available to all to read, to ponder, and to accept. There are many books among us and many preachers, and I find virtue in the words of all. But the truest source of divine wisdom is the word of the Lord in these sacred volumes, the standard works of the Church. [“Five Million Members—A Milestone and Not a Summit,” Ensign, May 1982, 45]*

Brigham Young once said:

*There is no ingenious mind that has ever invented anything beneficial to the human family but what he obtained it from that One Source, whether he knows or believes it or not. There is only one source from whence men obtain wisdom, and that is God, the fountain of all wisdom; and though men may claim to make their discoveries by their own wisdom, by meditation and reflection, they are indebted to our Father in heaven for all. [JD 13:148]*

The book of Proverbs gives some wonderful insights and instruction on wisdom—many almost in shorthand. Let me share a few:

*The fear [meaning reverence] of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction. [Proverbs 1:7]*

*Incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding. [Proverbs 2:2]*

*For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. [Proverbs 2:6]*

*Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. [Proverbs 3:13]*

*Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding. [Proverbs 4:7]*

*For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it. [Proverbs 8:11]*

There is so little we know from the current canon of scripture about the events of the Messiah’s life between the time of His birth and the beginning of His mortal ministry. That which we do know about the boy Jesus is especially precious. Let me share just two verses germane to our discussion today:

*And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him. . . .*

*And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man. [Luke 2:40, 52]*

I take comfort that even the perfect Savior of the World apparently learned and gained wisdom “line upon line, precept upon precept” (2 Nephi 28:30; D&C 98:12; see also D&C 93:12–14). Hence we should not be impatient even as we are “anxiously engaged” (D&C 58:27) in the intense and sometimes trying process of gaining knowledge and acquiring wisdom.

Listen to the words of Alma as he taught his son Helaman: “O, remember, my son, and learn wisdom in thy youth; yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God” (Alma 37:35). It is very wise for us to appreciate the relationship between obedience and wisdom.

Likewise, consider these words of Alma to another son, Shiblon: “And now, my son, I have told you this that ye may learn wisdom, that ye may learn of me that there is no other way or means whereby man can be saved, only in and through Christ” (Alma 38:9).

Alma was no less forthright and instructive when he spoke to the Zoramites who were feeling a little sorry for themselves. I suspect that on occasion even we, in our relatively comfortable circumstances, may feel a little oppressed or underappreciated. If that is the case, this counsel may apply equally to us:

*I say unto you, it is well that ye are cast out of your synagogues, that ye may be humble, and that ye may learn wisdom; for it is necessary that ye should learn wisdom; for it is because that ye are cast out, that ye are despised of your brethren because of your exceeding poverty, that ye are brought to a lowliness of heart; for ye are necessarily brought to be humble. [Alma 32:12]*

For those of you who are impatient that you have not yet reached perfection in your quest for wisdom, keep striving—but also keep King Benjamin’s advice in mind:

*And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man [or woman] should run faster than he [or she] has strength. And again, it is expedient that he [or she] should be diligent, that thereby he [or she] might win the prize; therefore, all things must be done in order. [Mosiah 4:27]*

This principle was true more than 2,100 years ago, and it is true today:

*For behold, thus saith the Lord God: I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have. [2 Nephi 28:30]*

For those of us in the BYU community who have the great blessing and privilege of learning in such a superb environment, we must be very careful that we do not get overly impressed by what knowledge we have acquired or by what wisdom we think we have gained. Listen to these warnings from Jacob, the brother of Nephi:

*O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish. . . .*

*And whoso knocketh, to him will he open; and the wise, and the learned, and they that are rich,*

*who are puffed up because of their learning, and their wisdom, and their riches—yea, they are they whom he despiseth; and save they shall cast these things away, and consider themselves fools before God, and come down in the depths of humility, he will not open unto them. [2 Nephi 9:28, 42]*

I might add parenthetically that knowing what we don't know is a good measure of wisdom.

And, now, here is Jacob's wonderful summary statement: "O be wise; what can I say more?" (Jacob 6:12).

As you know, there are many other statements by the prophets that we might address with respect to gaining wisdom. Let me summarize from those that I have shared several considerations for us in our quests for wisdom:

**First**, we must ask God in faith for the wisdom and understanding that we need.

**Second**, we should study and think carefully and thoroughly to acquire the knowledge that in most cases is a necessary antecedent to wisdom.

**Third**, since real wisdom always comes from heaven, we need to consider regularly, deeply, and seriously the word of God found in the scriptures.

**Fourth**, we need to remember that gaining wisdom and understanding is a lifelong process and not a one-time event.

**Fifth**, we must be cautious that we become and remain humble, particularly when we begin to feel that we have gained considerable knowledge from our endeavors here at BYU and when we go elsewhere.

**Sixth**, we must really believe that gaining true wisdom is possible and then act accordingly.

As I conclude and share my testimony of the veracity of what I have said and of the truthfulness of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, think of this benedictory counsel from President Gordon B. Hinckley at general conference in April 2003:

*Pray for wisdom and understanding as you walk the difficult paths of your lives. If you are determined to do foolish and imprudent things, I think the Lord will not prevent you. But if you seek His wisdom and follow the counsel of the impressions that come to you, I am confident that you will be blessed. ["Benediction," Ensign, May 2003, 100]*

May we all take advantage of our opportunities to increase in wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and faithfulness is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

