Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 10: Life Application

Certain things are to be understood only in the doing. One would not trust one's well-being to a pilot who had studied aviation theory but never flown a plane, nor would one go to a surgeon who had read anatomy books but never successfully operated. It is likewise vain to seek to understand right paths of life living from armchair philosophers who have not set a personal example worthy of emulation, or to rely on academic debate and consensus to uncover the secrets of happy living.

Similarly, gospel principles are understood only as individuals implement them in their lives. Jesus taught: "If anymanwilldo his [God's] will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself."[1] It is vain to attempt to understand truth merely in a theoretical sense: only those who apply divine principles to nurture the seed of faith[2] are capable of attaining certain insights; those with intellectual awareness who fail to apply truths to their life lose the understanding that they once possessed.[3] Great spiritual luminaries like Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, Gandhi, Epictetus, Mother Teresa, and most significantly, Jesus, were not armchair philosophers, but exemplars known for positive lifestyle and service.

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The Greek philosopher Epictetus wrote that there was little value to scholarly discourse and interpretation of truths without life application; the philosopher or lover of wisdom continually brought his life into harmony with truth:

> "When I find an interpreter, what remains is to make use of his instructions. This alone is the valuable thing. But, if I admire nothing but merely the interpretation, what do I become more than a grammarian instead of a philosopher. When anyone, therefore, desires me to read Chrysippus [a philosopher] to him, I rather blush when I cannot show my actions agreeable and consonant to his discourse."[4]

In the modern world, philosophy has become a discipline of academic discussion largely divided from any practical implementation of principles. Anyone with a theory or opinion about life's meaning calls himself a philosopher, leading to endless debate but few answers. Yet the term philosopher literally means lover of wisdom; the true lover of wisdom not only seeks but applies. As understood by the Greeks, philosophy was not primarily theoretical, but intensely practical: it was the example of great philosophers like Socrates and Crysippus, and not rhetoric and sophistry, that gave credibility to their logical assertions. They understood that there could be no true philosophy or love of wisdom without life application, because the personal implementation of principles of purity was the primary manner in which natural principles were deduced. They were the greatest beneficiaries of their discoveries as they received the blessings that flow through the application true principles in personal life. Without life application, there is no possibility of resolving the difficult questions that face mankind.

The knowledge that comes from doing cannot be transferred by telling alone. Teachers and mentors may help, yet full

understanding comes only from choosing to apply true principles for oneself and experiencing their fruits. Study and contemplation are essential, yet some truths can be fully understood only as we undertake to experiment upon the word and nourish the seed of faith in our heart by applying divine principles in our life. The Book of Mormon prophet Alma wrote:

> Now, we will compare the word unto a seed. Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your heart...Every seed bringeth forth unto its own likeness...As the tree beginneth to grow, ye will say: Let us nourish it with great care, that it may get root, that it may grow up, and bring forth fruit unto us. And now behold, if ye nourish it with much care it will get root, and grow up, and bring forth fruit. But if ye neglect the tree, and take no thought for its nourishment, behold it will not get any root; and when the heat of the sun cometh and scorcheth it, because it hath no root it withers away, and ye pluck it up and cast it out. Now, this is not because the seed was not good, neither is it because the fruit thereof would not be desirable; but it is because your ground is barren, and ye will not nourish the tree, therefore ye cannot have the fruit thereof. And thus, if ye will not nourish the word, looking forward with an eye of faith to the fruit thereof, ye can never pluck of the fruit of the tree of life. But if ye will nourish the word, yea, nourish the tree as it beginneth to grow, by your faith with great diligence, and with patience, looking forward to the fruit thereof, it shall take root; and behold it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life.[5]

Life application puts all mankind on a level field before God. We are accountable to Him not primarily for intellect, scholarly attainment, professional distinction, or other achievements, which come easily to some and hard to others, but for character and choices which are within the grasp of each person. The understanding gained from living true principles is real, yet constitutes a different kind of knowledge than that which is to be had from books. The application of true principles in our lives requires hard work and may stretch us beyond our comfort zones. But ultimately it is the only way to understand truth, and to experience the growth and life transformation which these truths offer.

[1] John 7:17
[2] see Alma chapter 32
[3] Luke 8:18, Alma 12:9-11
[4] Epictetus, The Enchiridion, translated by Elizabeth Carter, http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html
[5] Alma 32:37-42