



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

Chapter 33: Habits of Faith



The Savior's Ministry

During his mortal ministry, the Savior established his church and taught many precious truths. "In all points tempted like as we are yet without sin,"^[1] the Son of God performed miracles of providence and healing and "needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man."^[2] "He taught ... as one having authority, and not as the scribes"^[3] a new covenant that considered individual circumstances, intentions and actions. He taught that much was required of those to whom much was given. He proclaimed a universal family of the faithful: "whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother."^[4] He challenged his hearers, requiring a total sacrifice to God and service of fellow-man that left no doubt that one cannot serve two masters. Teaching of the need to cast off our sins, he taught: "And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire."^[5] He declared: "He that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me."^[6] "So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple."^[7] He admonished: "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."^[8] Many outwardly righteous individuals, such as the rich young ruler, went away sorrowing, unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices. At times his hearers murmured, saying: "This is a hard saying; who can hear it?,"^[9] and many of his followers left him. Yet he also taught: "my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."^[10] He adapted his teachings to his audience's level and taught publicans and sinners, finding in them a receptivity and a willingness to repent that the hardened Pharisees lacked. The Jews marveled at his doctrine: "How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?"^[11] His enemies used his rejection by the priests and elders of his day to discredit him, asking: "Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him?"^[12] Although the greatest of all, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as [a ransom] for many."^[13]

The Greek word *tekton*, a root of modern words including architect and tectonics, implies that the Christ was a builder -- a suitable profession for the framer of worlds who taught his disciples that he would go to prepare eternal abodes for them.^[14] John testified: "without him was not any thing made that was made."^[15] His parables include builder's imagery, such as the houses built on rock and sand, the man who began building a tower without counting the cost, and the promise that his church

would be built upon the rock of revelation, with he himself -- the stone that the builders rejected -- being the chief cornerstone. In three days he would build a temple without the workmanship of hands, referring to his resurrection. He taught of the great day in which he would bring all before God to be judged. The eternal reward he offered would be desired by all. Many would come to him and say: "Lord, Lord, open to us,"^[16] but those who did not know him would be turned away. His blessings are available to all: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him,"^[17] yet in the next life, the door of heaven will open only to those who knew and followed the voice of the good shepherd here. He taught: "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father;"^[18] "Ye are my friends, if ye do [all things] whatsoever I command you."^[19]

Scripture and Salvation

Throughout his ministry, the Savior frequently quoted scriptures to his hearers with the words: "it is written." He often answered his questioners by observing with mild incredulity their need to become more familiar with the holy writing, replying: "have ye not read" and then reciting a relevant passage. He commanded: "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me."^[20] He taught: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."^[21] His hearers could test the truth of his words by living them: "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself."^[22] After the resurrection, he continued to teach from the scriptures. Christ met two disciples on the road to Emmaus and "expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself ..." When they later recognized him as the Savior, "they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us ... while he opened to us the scriptures?"^[23] John testified of Christ, the Word which was in the beginning: "there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written."^[24] In modern revelation, Christ has declared: "I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it."^[25] He proclaims: "whosoever believeth on my words, them will I visit with the manifestation of my Spirit."^[26]

For many years, knowledge of scripture was lost to the common man. In ancient times, access to scriptures was limited due to low literacy and the absence of the printing press. Christ's apostles were persecuted and killed, and the church fell into apostasy. The Bible was once on the Index of Forbidden Books that Catholics could not read or possess. In medieval England, parents were burned at the stake for teaching their children verses of scripture in the common tongue. William Tyndale, primary translator of the English bible, and Joseph Smith, translator of the Book of Mormon, and countless others suffered as martyrs for their efforts to bring the scriptures forth to a fallen world.

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The Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon, another testament of Jesus Christ, was preserved for centuries and translated into English by a prophet through the power of God. The Book of Mormon is different than other scriptures in that Jesus Christ himself was the chief editor. Christ personally appeared to the main authors and editors of the Book of Mormon and instructed them what to write to convey a message of infinite importance in a limited space. The Book of Mormon has a unique endorsement among scripture, as the Lord testifies that it "contains ... the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ."^[27]

The Iron Rod

In Lehi and Nephi's dream of the Tree of Life, the iron rod which led to the tree and to eternal life represented the word of God, or the scriptures.^[28] Those who reached the Tree of Life did so not simply by becoming members of the Church, but by pressing forward while "continually holding fast to the rod of iron."^[29] The daily study and application of scripture brings great power into our lives. Helaman tells us: "whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God, which is quick and powerful, which shall ... lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course."^[30] William Tyndale stated: "The nature of God's word is that whosoever readeth it ... it will begin immediately to make him every day better and better, till he be grown into a perfect man." Moroni wrote: "I ... am commanded to write these things that evil may be done away, and that the time may come that Satan may have no power upon the hearts of the children of men, but that they may be persuaded to do good continually, that they may come unto the fountain of all righteousness and be saved."^[31]

The Divine Mandate

Modern prophets have also repeatedly emphasized the need for daily scripture reading. President Spencer Kimball taught: "We are saddened to learn as we travel about the stakes and missions of the Church that there are still many of the saints who are not reading and pondering the scriptures regularly and have little knowledge of the Lord's instructions to the children of men. Many have been baptized and received a testimony, and have 'gotten into this straight and narrow path,' yet have failed to take the further required step -- to 'press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end.'^[32] One cannot become a 'doer' of the word without first becoming a 'hearer.' And to become a 'hearer' is not simply to stand idly by and wait for chance bits of information, it is too seek out and study and pray and comprehend. Therefore, the Lord said, 'Whoso receiveth not my voice is not acquainted with my voice, and is not of me' (D&C 84:52)."^[33] President Ezra Taft Benson taught that we should read the Book of Mormon for half an hour each day with our families and make it a lifetime study: He declared: "Success in righteousness, the power to avoid deception and resist temptation, guidance in our daily lives, healing of the soul -- these are but a few of the promises the Lord has given to those who will come to His word ... However diligent we may be in other areas, certain blessings are to be found only in the scriptures."^[34] He taught that the members of the church are still under condemnation for taking the Book of Mormon lightly.

How many have wished for divine instruction, while failing to fully utilize that which the Lord has already given? A wise person once said: "When I want to talk to God, I pray. When I want God to talk to me, I read the scriptures." Hugh Nibley stated: "If you pray for an angel to visit you, you know what he'll do if he comes. He'll just quote the scriptures to you -- so you know you're wasting your time waiting for what we already have."^[35] Today we are blessed with ready access to the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and modern revelation. We have many tools -- searchable computer programs, concordances, interlinear Bibles, and more -- to help us to understand God's word. We have audiocassettes and CDs of scripture that help us to harvest time spent in mundane tasks such as driving or doing housework to expand our knowledge of the Lord. Elder L. Tom Perry states: "In all of the history of mankind there has never been a time when we have had a greater opportunity to increase our knowledge of the law of the Lord ... Surely there can be no excuse for us not to become the best informed generation of all time in our knowledge

of the scriptures. Never before have we had opportunity such as we have today to become real gospel scholars."

We will be judged according to whether our works, thoughts, and conscience show God's law to be written in our hearts.^[36] Daily scripture study helps the scriptures to become a part of us. Just as the Israelites had to gather manna daily because hoarded manna would spoil, we must daily gather the bread of life contained within the scriptures. The Holy Spirit cannot be bottled, canned, or stored, but is granted with our daily efforts to seek out and live God's word. We are commanded to feast on God's word, as eating a single cracker will not sustain us in physical labors through the heat of the day, nor is an occasional nibble on spiritual crumbs adequate to fortify our souls.

The Time Paradox

One study notes that two-thirds of active Latter-day Saints report reading scriptures at least once in the past week, but very few report reading on a daily basis. Two common excuses are given for low performance in scripture reading. The most common excuse is "I don't have time." Most of us have abundant access to food and other necessities of life, yet spiritual malnutrition is more prevalent today than ever before. The average US child has spent more time in front of the television set over the past year than at school. A century ago, a six-day work week made up of twelve-hour days was the norm for industrial workers. For the past forty years, the average US citizen has spent more time on personal and leisure pursuits than at work. A recent study noted: "Though they may not believe it, Americans have almost five hours more free time per week than in the 1960s, and 'most of the time they have gained is used for television viewing.'"^[37] Researchers noted that Americans feel "more rushed and stressed when we actually have more free time" and that we invest "time in activities that bring us minimal enjoyment or fulfillment." Over two and a half millennia ago, the prophet Isaiah warned: "Wherefore, do not spend money for that which is of no worth, nor your labor for that which cannot satisfy ... come unto the Holy One of Israel, and feast upon that which perisheth not, neither can be corrupted."^[38] Like Martha in the story of Mary and Martha, some fill their lives with good things while neglecting the essential.^[39] Scripture reading never happens by accident, and our allocation of time reflects our true priorities.

Catching the Vision of the Scriptures

The second excuse given for infrequent study of scriptures is, some claim, that "the scriptures are boring." Ezra Taft Benson referred to the Book of Mormon as the great sieve. The wicked are offended at its teachings, the worldly are not interested in it, while the righteous delight in it. Those who express that the scriptures are "boring" reveal much more about themselves than about the scriptures. When the Savior asked Peter if He was offended because of Him, Peter replied: "Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life."^[40] These are the words that the scriptures bring us. Ezra Taft Benson taught: "the Book of Mormon is not on trial -- the people of the world, including the members of the Church, are on trial as to what they will do with this second witness of Christ."^[41] Saint Augustine wrote: "Remember this. When people choose to withdraw far from a fire, the fire continues to give warmth, but they grow cold. When people choose to withdraw far from light, the light continues to be bright in itself but they are in darkness. This is also the case when people withdraw from God." Each of us must capture the vision of the scriptures. My great-grandmother, who passed away at the age of 104, had read the Book of Mormon through over a hundred times. She had expressed frequently that she was still learning. Saint Augustine stated: "The depth of the Christian Scriptures is boundless. Even if I were attempting to study them and nothing else, from boyhood to decrepit old age, with the utmost leisure, the most unwearied zeal, and with talents greater than I possess, I would still be making progress in discovering their treasures."

Start Early

We must start early in developing gospel habits. There is no greater gift we can offer our children than love for and understanding of the scriptures. Parents who neglect the habit of daily scripture reading with their families should not be surprised if their children do not serve missions or do not remain active in the church. Those who neglect habits of daily scripture reading in the belief that they will be able to start at a time of future convenience are deceiving themselves. With each act of disobedience or neglect, we surrender some of the power to change. The best time for us to develop the habit of daily scripture reading or to obey any righteous counsel is the first time, and implementing counsels that we have tuned out or neglected becomes progressively more difficult over time.

Consistency

Only through daily scripture reading can we gain the insight to properly conduct our own lives and to counsel our children wisely. Scripture reading can help us to gain the confidence to share the gospel with our neighbors and an understanding of what portion of God's word they may be ready to hear. As we "treasure up in [our] minds continually the words of life," the Holy Spirit will give us "in the very hour that portion that shall be meted unto every man."^[42] We must have carefully studied God's word for the Holy Ghost to bring to our remembrance the scriptural teachings and counsels that may be relevant to our current situation. The Holy Spirit does not draw water from empty wells. When daily scripture reading is continued for many years, great benefits accrue. Jim Rohn stated: "Success is nothing more than a few simple disciplines, practiced every day; while failure is simply a few errors in judgment, repeated every day." Neal A. Maxwell taught: "Personal, spiritual symmetry emerges only from the shaping of prolonged obedience."^[43] A Chinese proverb declares: "The person who removes a mountain begins by carrying away small stones ... Enough shovels of earth -- a mountain. Enough pails of water -- a river." This is why the scriptures stress so emphatically the need to "endure to the end." Without consistency at basic gospel habits, the gospel seed in our hearts will be choked by the cares of the world and become unfruitful.

Conclusion

In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord taught: "For if you will that I give unto you a place in the celestial world, you must prepare yourselves by doing the things which I have commanded you,"^[44] "For he who is not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory."^[45] If we do not make daily scripture study a priority, while we can still benefit from the application of other gospel principles, we can expect that we may fall short of our eternal possibilities. Spencer W. Kimball taught: "The Lord will not translate one's good hopes and desires and intentions into works. Each of us must do that for himself."^[46] Sister Elaine Cannon stated: "We are like children walking a path in the rain. We can walk in or around the mud of life as we desire, but with our choices come the consequences. And we are rapidly becoming what we are choosing to be for all eternity."^[47] I count as the greatest blessing of my youth that when President Benson asked the members of the church to read the Book of Mormon for half an hour each day, that my parents responded and our family has continued that habit ever since. I am grateful for God's eternal word. Though heaven and earth pass away, the word of the Lord shall endure forever. I testify that

Christ, the true light of every man and woman that comes into this world, stands at the door of our soul and knocks daily.

[1][Hebrews 4:15](#)

[2][John 2:25](#)

[3][Matthew 7:29](#)

[4][Matthew 12:50](#)

[5][Mark 9:47](#)

[6][Matthew 10:37-38](#)

[7][Luke 14:33](#)

[8][Luke 12:15](#)

[9][John 6:60](#)

[10][Matthew 11:30](#)

[11][John 7:15](#)).

[12][John 7:48](#)

[13][Matthew 20:28](#), Weymouth NT/brackets KJV

[14][John 14:2](#)

[15][John 1:3](#)

[16][Matthew 25:11](#)

[17][Revelation 3:20](#)

[18][John 14:21](#)

[19][John 15:14](#)

[20][John 5:39](#)

[21][Matthew 4:4](#)

[22][John 7:17](#)

[23][Luke 24:27, 32](#)

[24][John 21:25](#)

[25][2 Nephi 29:12](#)

[26][D&C 5:16](#)

[27][D&C 20:9-11](#)

[28][1 Nephi 11:25](#)

[29][1 Nephi 8:30](#)

[30][Helaman 3:29](#)

[31][Ether 8:26](#)

[32][2 Nephi 31:19, 20](#)

[33] Kimball, Spencer W. "[First Presidency Message: How Rare a Possession -- The Scriptures!](#)," Ensign, July 1985, p. 3.

[34] Benson, Ezra Taft. "[The Power of the Word](#)," Ensign, May 1986, p. 79.

[35] Nibley, Hugh. Of All Things, p. 42.

[36][Romans 2:15](#)

[37]"[How Do Americans Use Their Time?](#)" Penn State Press Release. 8 May 1997. Accessed 1 July 2005.

[38][2 Nephi 9:51](#)

[39][Luke 10:38-42](#)

[40][John 6:68](#)

[41] Benson, Ezra Taft. "[A New Witness for Christ](#)," LDS General Conference, October 1984, Ensign, November 1984, p. 6.

[42][D&C 84:85](#)

[43] Maxwell, Neal A. "[Endure It Well](#)," Ensign, May 1990, p. 34.

[44][D&C 78:7](#)

[45][D&C 88:22](#)

[46] Kimball, Spencer W. The Miracle of Forgiveness, pp. 7-8.

[47] Cannon, Elaine. "[Agency and Accountability](#)," Ensign, November 1983, p. 88.