

“The Wise Woman Who Built Her House upon the Rock”

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I struggled as I worked on this talk for wiser words than my own to share. In the end, I come before you with simple thoughts, hopefully Spirit-inspired, regarding the principle of righteous judgment. These thoughts are grounded in the scriptures, my own life experience, and what I'll call my fieldwork as a mother of teenage sons. (I'm just glad I have sons and not daughters, though. I think that might be worse.) It's in "the field," it's in my work with my sons, it's in my experimenting upon the word, in putting principles into practice, that I have grown in my testimony of the truth and of the necessity of making daily righteous judgments.

President Harold B. Lee taught in the Sermon on the Mount that it is a standard for perfection, a blueprint for our lives.¹ One of the principles of perfection included in these teachings of the Savior is "judge not, that ye be not judged." Although this account in the book of Matthew instructs us to refrain from judging, the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible corrects this restriction, enlarging our understanding that it is incumbent upon us to "judge righteous judgment" (JST Matthew 7:1; Matthew 7:1). The Savior's standards for perfection, His blueprint or pattern for celestial behavior, includes righteous judgment.

We live in a world where many "call evil good, and good evil," putting "darkness for light, and light for darkness" (2 Nephi 15:20). Is it any wonder that for us to proceed through mortality, to attain eternal life, we need to be able to judge? When we judge, we critique, we evaluate, we analyze, we form an opinion, we interpret. Judge comes from the Latin word *judex*, meaning one who points out the right.² Our ability to point out the right, to choose the right, depends upon our ability to judge righteously. Our judgments directly affect our choices; and we make choices based on our judgments. The choices we make will either lead us toward eternal life, or they'll lead us toward captivity and death. Put in Sermon on the Mount terms, we can either found our house upon the rock or build it upon the sand. In learning to judge righteous judgment, we build ourselves, we build our testimonies, so that neither rain nor flood nor wind can destroy us (Matthew 7:25–27).

But righteous judgment goes beyond judging people. We must also judge philosophies, doctrines, institutions; we must judge cultures, programs, plans, suggestions, recommendations, and commandments of men. It is our job to judge all things that come into our lives, even those foolish things that interfere with our lives—in essence, those things that interfere with our path to eternal life. In 1 Corinthians 2:15 we read: "They that are spiritual judgeth all things."

President Joseph F. Smith said regarding this scripture: “We should possess the Spirit of God, and be able to discern by the power and influence of the Spirit, which is . . . referred to by Paul. We ought not to be in the condition that a great portion of the world is in. We ought not to be dependent, as they are, upon the wisdom, or judgment of man, but we should be dependent upon the wisdom of God, and upon the judgment of the Almighty. We should possess and wield the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, in our conduct, in our labor, in all our associations, and whatever we put hands [to]. We should be guided always by the Spirit of the Lord, and not by the spirit nor by the wisdom, nor by or in accordance with the ordinary understanding, of men.”³

They that are spiritual “judgeth all things,” and in order to judge all things, we have to do it righteously: We must move beyond “the ordinary understanding of men.” I’m like you in desiring to be more than ordinary, but I strive to be spiritual in the things I judge. In my present state of being, however, my ability to judge righteously those influences that I allow into my life is impeded by personal motes and beams.

One such obstruction is my unwillingness to accept my individual responsibility to judge all things. On one of my infrequent visits to the grocery store—my children tell me that I don’t shop enough—I noticed a college-aged student walking toward me, scanning the wide selection of laundry detergent on the aisle. The young man passed me, turned around, and came back down the aisle, engaged in what appeared to be speed comparison shopping. I finished putting a thirty-pound bucket of the brand of detergent I normally buy onto my cart and made my way to the checkout stand. As I waited to pay for my groceries, I noticed this young man in the checkout line next to me. His only purchase? The same brand of laundry detergent I was buying that day, only in much smaller quantity!

Now, I don’t know that this young man made his detergent choice based on the brand he saw me select—my laundry detergent may have been and probably is the cheapest brand on the shelf—but I do know that this brief encounter brought to my memory the times when my confidence to buy something, my confidence to do something, to choose something, has been based on the Decisions I’ve seen others make.

I’m not proposing that following the example of others or seeking input from others is bad. When I have a sick child, one of my first calls is to a friend who’s the mother of many and who has experienced every illness known to man. When my car is ailing, I have a colleague who is good to go for a lunch-time drive and give a pre-mechanic diagnosis. But I have noticed that I am more willing to defer decision making when I don’t want to—or perhaps feel unable to—expend the effort and the energy required to judge things for myself. It’s in these moments when I’m willing to abdicate my agency, when I’m willing to take someone else’s word with no thought of my own, that I’ve relinquished my responsibility as judge.

A beam that often obscures my ability to judge is the desire for prescriptions instead of principles. On too many occasions I’ve heard myself say, “If the Lord would just tell me what to do, I’d do it.” Tied to the mote of not wanting to accept responsibility to judge is the mote of seeking for divine prescriptions. That’s like asking for a recall of my vote on the

plan of salvation. In essence I'm saying, "I don't want the right to choose. I want to be told."

A wise man said that those whom you love most may be injured by your "robbing them of the opportunity to exercise judgment."⁴ In asking the Lord to instruct us in all things, we are doing just that. One doesn't have to be a parent long to understand the divine wisdom of a plan that teaches principles to allow us to govern ourselves. On many occasions, my sons have opportunities to travel without me. As I take them to the airport, my mind is flooded with all the things I didn't tell them, all of the things I might not have taught. Our preflight conversations often turn into a list of do's and don'ts according to Mom.

On one such occasion, as I said farewell to my sons before they boarded their plane, I realized that my attempt to provide a list of prescriptions for every instance they might encounter was not only impossible but also debilitating. When faced with the difficult daily decisions of what to watch, what to wear, what to say, defending their positions with "because Mom told me so" was not a strong option. My teenaged sons needed to ground their judgments, their choices, in gospel principles contained in the scriptures and in the counsel of prophets and apostles.

President Joseph Fielding Smith taught: "The word of the Lord means more to me than anything else. I place it before the teachings of men. The truth is the thing which will last. All the theory, philosophy and wisdom of the wise that is not in harmony with revealed truth from God will perish. They must change and pass away, and they are changing and passing away constantly, but when the Lord speaks that is eternal truth on which we may rely."⁵

If I am not always in harmony with revealed truth and my children's judgments are founded on my beliefs and actions, they may in fact perish. My sons are of the age and maturity level where they should never use the rationale that something is right or wrong because their mother told them so. The only sure rationale upon which they may rely is that things are right or wrong because God says it is so.

Another mote that often encumbers my ability to judge righteously is failing to acknowledge the point of view or the perspective from which I judge. One of my sons is a runner. After returning home from one of his first races, he announced that he had "PR'd." This term was new to me, so I asked if he meant he had won. No, he had not won—he had come in last in his heat—but he had PR'd. I was amazed that he was so proud about losing, and for an instant I was embarrassed at his performance. The conversation went on. I asked, "So, just what does 'PR'd' mean?" My son said, "Personal Record." He was proudly proclaiming that he had set a new personal record in his running event that day—he had PR'd. I cringed at my earlier judgment. In my point of view, success was tied to winning; from my son's perspective, success was based on improvement.

"Our understanding is limited and we judge according to the things we know and with which we are familiar."⁶ Personal perspectives are the familiar frameworks upon which our judgments are based. It's hard not to judge the actions of others or the things placed before us that are outside our past or present circumstance. Given that, we need to be open, yet discerning, to the suggestions and recommendations handed to us by others. We must never

forget that our judgments and the judgments of others are influenced by individual inspiration and knowledge—or the lack thereof. We need to be actively engaged in discerning the correctness of the input that is so freely given. Discernment is a gift of the Spirit that we should seek. The understanding and enlightenment we receive through this gift is commensurate with our tasks and responsibilities.

Another influence on our personal perspectives is ideas endorsed, even introduced, by the adversary and his cohorts. It seems as though Satan senses when we are making eternal progress and increases the “shafts in the whirlwind” (Helaman 5:12). One of the adversary’s greatest tactics is to pacify and lull us into “carnal security” (2 Nephi 28:21–22), into accepting the relativism of our day. We’re bombarded with messages that flatter us into believing that there is no evil, that rampant individuality knows no bounds and is protected under the law of agency. Not only do we need to be diligent in discerning these ravenous wolves that come to us in sheep’s clothing (Matthew 7:15) but we need to pray consistently to resist temptation and to be able to see temptations for what they really are.

Oftentimes it is our perspective, our own resolute righteousness, about a situation, a policy, or a practice that prohibits accurate evaluation. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Savior instructed His disciples that they must teach their followers how to ask: “Say unto to them, ask of God; ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and unto him that knocketh, it shall be opened.” Joseph Smith’s translation of these verses gives added insight that seems to apply to righteous judgment: “And then said [the Savior’s] disciples unto him, they will say unto us, we ourselves are righteous, and need not that any man should teach us. God, we know, heard Moses and some of the prophets; but us he will not hear” (JST Matthew 7:112–14; Matthew 7:7–8). So, why were those, the Savior’s disciples taught, unable to hear God? What effect did this “deafness” have on their ability to judge? These scriptures teach that we are unable to hear when we are unwilling to be taught. Likewise, our ability to judge righteously requires that we set aside our opinions, our pride, because if we don’t, we are like those that “need not that any man should [teach them].” By acknowledging our individual bias, by abandoning the belief that we are beyond learning, we will be able to hear and will be better equipped to exercise righteous judgment.

Judging righteous judgment is judging as the Father and the Son judge. The scriptures teach that God will judge according to His commandments, not according to our traditions; that He will judge according to our works and the desires of our hearts, not according to the sight of the eyes and the hearing of the ears; that He will judge everything which inviteth to do good and persuade to believe in Christ, to be of God; that He will judge whatsoever thing persuadeth men not to believe in Christ, and to deny Him, and to serve not God but to be of the devil (John 7:24; Mosiah 29:11–12; D&C 137:9; 2 Nephi 21: 3–4; Moroni 7:16–17).

The judging criteria seem rather clear, and a loving Heavenly Father has given each of us a guide. As members of the Church, we know that the “light by which [we] may judge” is the Holy Ghost (Moroni 7:18). In Doctrine and Covenants 11:12–14, we read: “And now, verily, verily, I say unto thee, put your trust in that spirit which leadeth to do good—yea, to do justly, to walk humbly, to judge righteously; and this is my spirit. . . . I will impart unto

you of my spirit, which shall enlighten your mind, which shall fill your soul with joy; and then shall ye know, or by this shall you know, all things whatsoever you desire of me, which are pertaining unto things of righteousness, in faith believing in me that you shall receive.”

In order to judge, we have to be righteous. And part of being righteous is to judge as He would judge, to judge by the Spirit. During the last hours of the Savior’s life, He taught His apostles about the gift they would receive when He was no longer with them. “But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance” (John 14:26).

This is not new doctrine. We all know that when we received the gospel of Jesus Christ and were baptized, hands were laid upon our heads and we were given the gift of the Holy Ghost. With this gift, we have the power to call upon the Spirit whenever we feel the need for His help.⁷ We understand that the Holy Ghost manifests Himself to us in different ways. I believe we are all desirous for Him to be our guide. To judge righteous judgment, He must be our guide. And in His role as guide, we must look to this third member of the Godhead for confirmation on all our judgments, all of our choices. Righteous judgment involves confirmation from the Holy Ghost. In our day-to-day lives, it is necessary to judge many things. But it’s only after we’ve arrived at a judgment, a decision, that we are able to seek confirmation through the Spirit. One of the functions of the Holy Ghost is “to approve of and attest to the [truthfulness] of our ordinances, [our] actions, and [our] convictions. He . . . figuratively places his stamp of approval on our lives, just as an ancient king used his personal seal to certify the validity of a document or an action.”⁸

So, how is it that we can obtain this witness, or stamp of approval, this confirmation from the Spirit on all of our judgments or conclusions? Brother Harold Glen Clark, first president of the Provo Utah Temple, provided this insight in his book, *The Art of Governing Zion*: “The initiative to go through the thought process and draw a conclusion [or a judgment] always rests with the problem solver. The Lord will never take to himself the toil, sweat, and sometimes the tears required to think through the challenges of one’s own life. This precious, soul-building task belongs to the individual. At the end one humbly hands to God his best conclusion, asking for his guidance, with willingness to accept God’s amendments, rejection, or confirmation. God will not turn a deaf ear if one prays worthily in this manner: ‘Father, I have tried to use every good skill and honest effort in this decision. If it is right, may I proceed with a feeling that it is thy will. If it is wrong, cause that I may not be permitted to proceed, but in thy wisdom be restrained from carrying it out.’ ”⁹

As we learn to make judgments and come to a decision, confirming our decisions or choices with the Lord through the Spirit, we are applying the principle of righteous judgment. As righteous judges, we will have taken the Holy Spirit for our guide and we will be protected from those who lie in wait to deceive us (D&C 45:57). The only way not be deceived is to judge every influence we allow into our own lives and into the lives of those we are responsible for.

I began with the Savior’s teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, our behavioral blueprint for eternal life. At the end of this sermon, Jesus likened those who heard and did His words

to a “wise [wo]man, which built [her] house upon a rock” (Matthew 7:24). Reading this parable brought to mind the foot rest under my desk at home—it’s an old, worn-out dictionary. If I’m ever in need of a definition or spell check, I know right where to look—it’s always under my feet. as I pondered and prayed and tried to prepare this talk, I was struck by the analogy sitting on my floor. Building upon the rock is literally anchoring ourselves upon the words and teachings of our Savior, Jesus Christ. If, as I do with my well-worn dictionary, I will turn to Him, to His words and the words of His servants, if I will seek understanding through prayer, my foundation will be sure.

We are and we will be held accountable for our judgments. The manner in which we accept or reject “the oracles of God” (Romans 3:2)—meaning His leaders, His doctrines, His principles—will determine if we will “stumble and fall when the storms descend, and the winds blow, and the rains descend, and beat upon [our] house” (D&C 90:5). Our ability to hearken and obey, to judge righteously, will enable us to weather life’s storms (D&C 6:34). In making righteous judgments, we build upon His rock; and when we are built upon His rock, earth and hell cannot prevail against us. May we strive to be more righteous in our judgment is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1 Harold B. Lee, vol. 2 of Teachings of the Presidents of the Church series (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 200.

2 Webster’s New World Dictionary, 3d college ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), s.v. “judge.”

3 Joseph F. Smith, “Christ Our Exemplar,” in Collected Discourses, 1886–1898, sel. Brian H. Stuy, 5 vols. (Burbank, Calif., and Woodland Hills, Utah: B. H. S. Publishing, 1987–92), 5:49–50.

4 Harold Glen Clark, The Art of Governing Zion (Provo: Brigham Young University Extension Publications, Division of Continuing Education, 1966), 613.

5 Joseph Fielding Smith, Doctrines of Salvation, ed. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:108.

6 Smith, Doctrines of Salvation, 1:10.

7 Smith, Doctrines of Salvation, 1:42.

8 Thy People Shall Be My People and Thy God My God: The 22d Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 113.

9 Clark, Governing Zion, 617.

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