

“The Principles of My Gospel”

(Doctrine and Covenants 42:12)

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A gospel principle is a doctrinally based guideline for the righteous exercise of moral agency.

In the general conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in October 1849, Elder John Taylor of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was called to open the nation of France for the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. His service included the editing of the first official Church periodical in that country. Elder Taylor prepared and published an article in 1851 in response to frequent questions he had been asked about the Church. And near the end of that essay, Elder Taylor recalled the following episode:

“Some years ago, in Nauvoo, a gentleman in my hearing, a member of the Legislature, asked Joseph Smith how it was that he was enabled to govern so many people, and to preserve such perfect order; remarking at the same time that it was impossible for them to do it anywhere else. Mr. Smith remarked that it was very easy to do that. ‘How?’ responded the gentleman; ‘to us it is very difficult.’ Mr. Smith replied, ‘I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves.’”¹

I pray that the Holy Ghost will instruct and edify each of us as I emphasize the important role of principles in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

Principles

The Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith that “the elders, priests and teachers of this church shall teach the principles of my gospel, which are in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, in the which is the fulness of the gospel.”² He also declared that the Latter-day Saints should “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.”³

Stated succinctly, a gospel principle is a doctrinally based guideline for the righteous exercise of moral agency. Principles derive from broader gospel truths and provide direction and standards as we press forward on the covenant path.

For example, the first three Articles of Faith identify fundamental aspects of the doctrine of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ: the nature of the Godhead in the

first article of faith, the effects of the Fall of Adam and Eve in the second article of faith, and the blessings made possible through the Atonement of Jesus Christ in the third article of faith.⁴ And the fourth article of faith sets forth the first principles—the guidelines of exercising faith in Jesus Christ and repenting—and the first priesthood ordinances that enable the Atonement of Jesus Christ to be efficacious in our lives.⁵

The Word of Wisdom is another example of a principle as a guideline. Please note these introductory verses in section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

“Given for a principle with promise, adapted to the capacity of the weak and the weakest of all saints, who are or can be called saints.

“Behold, verily, thus saith the Lord unto you: In consequence of evils and designs which do and will exist in the hearts of conspiring men in the last days, I have warned you, and forewarn you, by giving unto you this word of wisdom by revelation.”⁶

The inspired instruction that follows this introduction provides enduring guidelines for both physical and spiritual well-being and testifies of specific blessings contingent upon our faithfulness to the principle.

Learning, understanding, and living gospel principles strengthen our faith in the Savior, deepen our devotion to Him, and invite a multitude of blessings and spiritual gifts into our lives. Principles of righteousness also help us to look beyond our personal preferences and self-centered desires by providing the precious perspective of eternal truth as we navigate the different circumstances, challenges, decisions, and experiences of mortality.

Contemporary Examples of Teaching Correct Principles

The statement by the Prophet Joseph Smith about teaching correct principles is perhaps one of his most frequently quoted teachings. And we find powerful examples of this inspired pattern of instruction in the pronouncements of the Lord’s authorized servants today.

The Principle of Non-Distraction

President Dallin H. Oaks spoke in general conference in 1998 about Aaronic Priesthood holders’ duties related to preparing and administering the sacrament. He described *the principle of non-distraction* and indicated that a holder of the Aaronic Priesthood would never want anything in his appearance or behavior to distract any member of the Church from his or her worship and renewal of covenants. President Oaks also emphasized the related principles of orderliness, cleanliness, reverence, and dignity.

Interestingly, President Oaks did not provide for the young men a lengthy list of things to do and not to do. Rather, he explained the principle with the expectation

that the young men and their parents and teachers could and should use their own judgment and inspiration to follow the guideline.

He explained: “I will not suggest detailed rules, since the circumstances in various wards and branches in our worldwide Church are so different that a specific rule that seems required in one setting may be inappropriate in another. Rather, I will suggest a principle based on the doctrines. If all understand this principle and act in harmony with it, there should be little need for rules. If rules or counseling are needed in individual cases, local leaders can provide them, consistent with the doctrines and their related principles.”⁷

The Principle of the Sabbath as a Sign

In the April 2015 general conference, President Russell M. Nelson taught us that “the Sabbath is a delight.”⁸ He also explained how he personally had come to understand a basic principle about honoring the Sabbath day:

“How do we *hallow* the Sabbath day? In my much younger years, I studied the work of others who had compiled lists of things to do and things *not* to do on the Sabbath. It wasn’t until later that I learned from the scriptures that my conduct and my attitude on the Sabbath constituted a *sign* between me and my Heavenly Father. With that understanding, I no longer needed lists of dos and don’ts. When I had to make a decision whether or not an activity was appropriate for the Sabbath, I simply asked myself, ‘*What sign do I want to give to God?*’ That question made my choices about the Sabbath day crystal clear.”⁹

President Nelson’s simple but powerful question emphasizes a principle that cuts through any uncertainty about what it means and what we should do to honor the Sabbath. His question summarizes a guideline and standard that can bless all of us in our varied circumstances.

The Principle of Being Willing to Let God Prevail

Six months ago in general conference, President Nelson described his personal elation as he was led to a new insight about the meaning of the word *Israel*. He told us that his soul was stirred as he learned that “the very name of *Israel* refers to a person who is *willing* to let God prevail in his or her life.”¹⁰ President Nelson then identified a number of important implications that derive from this insight.

His message about *being willing to let God prevail* is a remarkable example of teaching correct principles so that we can govern ourselves. And just as he did in his message about making the Sabbath a delight, President Nelson posed principle-based questions that serve as guides and standards for each of us.

“Are *you* willing to let God prevail in your life? Are *you* willing to let God be the most important influence in your life?”

He continued:

“Consider how such willingness could bless you. If you are unmarried and seeking an eternal companion, your desire to be ‘of Israel’ will help you decide whom to

date and how.

“If you are married to a companion who has broken his or her covenants, your willingness to let God prevail in your life will allow your covenants with God to remain intact. The Savior will heal your broken heart. The heavens will open as you seek to know how to move forward. You do not need to wander or wonder.

“If you have sincere questions about the gospel or the Church, as you choose to let God prevail, you will be led to find and understand the absolute, eternal truths that will guide your life and help you stay firmly on the covenant path.

“When you are faced with temptation—even if the temptation comes when you are exhausted or feeling alone or misunderstood—imagine the courage you can muster as you choose to let God prevail in your life and as you plead with Him to strengthen you.

“When your greatest desire is to let God prevail, to be part of Israel, so many decisions become easier. So many issues become nonissues! You know how best to groom yourself. You know what to watch and read, where to spend your time, and with whom to associate. You know what you want to accomplish. You know the kind of person you really want to become.”¹¹

Note how many crucial decisions and life experiences can be influenced by the principle of *being willing to let God prevail*: dating and marriage, gospel questions and concerns, temptation, personal grooming, what to watch and read, where to spend time, with whom to associate, and many, many more. President Nelson’s inspired questions emphasize a simple principle that provides direction in every aspect of our lives and enables us to govern ourselves.

A Very Small Helm

When Joseph Smith was imprisoned in Liberty Jail, he wrote letters of instruction to Church members and leaders and reminded them that “a very large ship is benefited very much by a very small helm in the time of a storm, by being kept workways with the wind and the waves.”¹²

A “helm” is a wheel or tiller and the associated equipment used to steer a ship or a boat. And “workways with the wind and the waves” denotes turning a ship so that it maintains its balance and does not capsize during a storm.

Gospel principles are for me and you what a helm is to a ship. Correct principles enable us to find our way and to stand firm, steadfast, and immovable so we do not lose our balance and fall in the raging latter-day storms of darkness and confusion.

We have been blessed abundantly in this general conference to learn about eternal principles from the Lord’s authorized servants. Now, our individual responsibility is to govern ourselves according to the truths of which they have testified.¹³

Testimony

President Ezra Taft Benson taught, “For the next six months, your conference edition of the [*Liahona*] should stand next to your standard works and be referred to frequently.”¹⁴

With all the energy of my soul, I invite all of us to learn, live, and love principles of righteousness. Only gospel truths can enable us to “cheerfully do all things that lie in our power” to press forward on the covenant path and to “see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed.”¹⁵

I know that the doctrine and principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ are the foundational sources of direction for our lives and of enduring joy in mortality and eternity. And on this glorious Easter Sunday, I joyfully witness that our living Savior is the fount from which these truths flow. I so testify in the sacred name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.