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Tad R. Callister

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Sunday School General President Tad R. Callister.

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## *The Power of Principles*

TAD R. CALLISTER

Tad R. Callister was serving in the Presidency of the Seventy and as a member of the Second Quorum of the Seventy when he was called as Sunday School General President.

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*On 15 July 2017, the Karl G. Maeser Memorial Building on the campus of Brigham Young University became the site for the first annual conference of the LDS Educators Association. The purpose of the association is to challenge LDS educators to consider the relationship between their sacred covenants and their professional practice. It provides a place to discuss critical contemporary issues in the context of faith, encourage educators to consider the unique aspects of LDS doctrine, and network together in finding the most effective ways to strengthen learning in all settings.*

*Latter-day Saint educators face great challenges in a world that is rapidly changing its most basic values and standards. From its beginning, the LDS Church has been committed to the preparation of faithful teachers, not only for the Church but also for the public school system. The association believes there is great reason to add continuing support to those who choose to spend their careers seeking to enhance the learning of our Heavenly Father's children wherever they may be serving.*

*On Friday evening a reception and business meeting was held in the Education in Zion exhibit, where officers were elected and bylaws for the*

association were adopted. The exhibit served as a great reminder of the educational heritage Latter-day Saints have.

Participants in the general sessions came to the conference from as far away as North Carolina, Oregon, and California to participate in this inaugural conference. The theme of the conference was taken from Brigham Young's charge to Karl G. Maeser that he "ought not to teach even the alphabet or the multiplication tables without the Spirit of God." Keynote addresses were given by Tad R. Callister, Sunday School General President, and John S. Tanner, president of BYU–Hawaii. Other presentations were given by Mossi White, Alan Wilkins, Scott Ferrin, Brian Bowles, Amy Miner, Mark Woodruff, and A. LeGrand (Buddy) Richards.

This address by Brother Callister was given at the conference. Next year's conference will be held on 6 July 2018. Those interested in attending can learn more at <http://education.byu.edu/ldsea>.

### What Are Principles?

Today I would like to talk about principles and rules as they pertain to our learning and teaching, and particularly to the power that principles can play in our lives. First, what are principles? I believe principles are eternal truths that are condensed and framed in such a way as to promote our maximum agency, thus making possible our maximum growth. Rules, on the other hand are usually more prescriptive and thus, to a degree, may restrict our agency and thus restrict our growth. Rules can be good at times, however, especially when they are a means, not an end—when they become a stepping-stone to eventually living by principles—when, like the law of Moses, they are a "schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ" (Galatians 3:24).

### God's People Are Governed by Principles

Both Zion and the celestial kingdom are governed by principles. The Lord said, "And Zion cannot be built up *unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom*; otherwise I cannot receive her unto myself" (D&C 105:5; emphasis added). The Lord also declared "that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled *only upon the principles of righteousness*" (D&C 121:36; emphasis added).

When Joseph Smith was asked how he governed the Saints, he replied, "I teach them correct principles and they govern themselves."<sup>1</sup> The Lord confirmed this truth when he instructed the leaders and teachers of the Church

to "teach the principles of my gospel, which are in the Bible and the Book of Mormon" (D&C 42:12; emphasis added). Later he commanded, "Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, *in principle*, in doctrine" (D&C 88:78; emphasis added). The scriptures also teach us that "*whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life*, it will rise with us in the resurrection" (D&C 130:18; emphasis added).

Principles are also taught to those in the spirit world. After declaring that faith, repentance, baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost were taught to the spirits in prison, President Joseph F. Smith observed that these spirits were also taught "*all other principles of the gospel* that were necessary for them . . . that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit (D&C 138:33–34; emphasis added), meaning according to the same gospel principles taught to mortals on earth. And thus gospel teachers both in the spirit world and on the earth focus on principles.

Nephi taught his people a principle that encompasses many other principles: "Feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do" (2 Nephi 32:3). For some years I wondered how the words of Christ could teach me all things I should do. Could they tell me the name of my future wife or the exact vocation I should pursue? Could I look in Isaiah or Galatians or Mosiah to find those answers? Then I realized that in a much grander way the scriptures do exactly what they say they will do. Feasting upon the scriptures helps us discover divine principles that can govern our life. In addition, scripture study invites the Spirit to help us apply those principles in a way that can address our specific needs. In other words, the scriptures are a treasure trove of principles and a means to the Spirit that can guide us back to our Father in Heaven.

President Boyd K. Packer spoke to this same issue: "There is no question—personal or social or political or occupational—that need go unanswered. Therein is contained the fullness of the everlasting gospel. Therein we find principles of truth that will resolve every confusion and every problem and every dilemma that will face the human family or any individual in it."<sup>2</sup>

### Why Does Our Father in Heaven Want Us to Live by Principles?

One might ask, "Why does our Father in Heaven want us to live by principles whenever possible?" I believe that there are at least five reasons.

**First:** Principles promote agency and growth. When we are taught a principle, we can exercise our agency in a multiplicity of ways. For example, consider the principle, “When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17). This principle does not tell us how to serve or when to serve or how long to serve. Instead the principle allows us to customize our unique talents to best meet the needs of those around us, without being directed to provide a specific solution for a specific need.

The Lord spoke to this point: “For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward” (D&C 58:26). In other words, the Lord said, “It is not wise that I give you a rule or command to govern every circumstance.” And then the Lord gave this additional insight: “Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and *do many things of their own free will*, and bring to pass much righteousness; *For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves*. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward” (D&C 58:27–28; emphasis added).

**Second:** Principles are flexible and adaptable to a wide range of circumstances. Rules such as “Don’t watch TV on Sunday” are often limited in application to a specific situation at a specific time. Principles, however, such as “keep the Sabbath day holy,” are eternal truths designed to apply to a much broader range of circumstances.

Elder Richard G. Scott explained it this way: “As you seek spiritual knowledge, search for principles. Carefully separate them from the detail used to communicate or explain them. Principles are encapsulated knowledge, packaged to be applicable to a wide variety of circumstances. It is worth great labor to reduce information we gather to succinct statements of principle”

**Third:** Divine principles have the power to translate years of experience and vast quantities of knowledge into simple statements of truth. Principles can encompass our multiple experiences and then with laser-like focus extract the central truth and express it in its most condensed form—in essence, into easily digestible elements of truth. For example, consider the principle “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10). One might try every conceivable type of sin over a lifetime, but the consequences of doing so will boil down to this reality—“wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10). One might ultimately discover this truth by sad, even tragic experiences, or one might

learn this simple principle of truth by feasting upon God’s word. Principles can save us from learning “the hard way.”

Likewise, principles reduce knowledge to its simplest form. There are hundreds of scriptures and numerous books that teach about the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Amulek, however, captured a key element of the atonement in this simple statement: “There must be an atonement made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish” (Alma 34:9). As we teach principles, we can condense vast quantities of knowledge into simple statements that are readily understandable and applicable to life’s problems.

**Fourth:** Principles can engender feelings of trust. As a young boy, I remember my parents saying to me, “Tad, we have some money in this drawer in our bedroom. If you truly need some and we are not home, you are welcome to take what you need.” There were no rules on what it could be used for, no limitation on how much could be taken at a given time—only the principle of need. I remember thinking on multiple occasions, “My parents trust me!” It was a very rewarding feeling. I never wanted to violate that trust. Gospel principles can have a similar effect. Knowing that God trusts us, as evidenced by the giving of principles, can have a powerful, motivational effect to live a more Christlike life.

**Fifth:** Sometimes principles help us understand the “why” behind a commandment. For example, consider the commandment to seek knowledge and gain an education. Many people pursue education in order to earn a good living. There is nothing wrong with this. However, the scriptures teach a principle that greatly expands our vision: “If a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come” (D&C 130:19).

### Practical Examples

Now let’s discuss some practical examples of principles and rules.

#### Example 1

Suppose the issue is, “What can I do on the Sabbath?” and your teenage son asks you, “Dad, can I watch TV on Sunday?” What would be the difference if you responded with principles as compared to rules? Let’s assume you have a rule in your home that there is “no TV watching on Sunday.” What might be the problem with that rule? What if your son comes to you and says, “But Dad, I would like to watch general conference.” And you reply, “Oh, there

is an exception for that.” Or what if your son says, “Dad, I would like to watch the Church’s Christmas devotional on Sunday night or *Mr. Krueger’s Christmas* or a documentary on the reformers so I can learn how they laid the foundation for the Restoration.” Do you grant an exception for each of these? If so, where do the exceptions end? And what becomes the fixed standard for what your son should and should not watch?

The Savior, during His mortal ministry, taught two key principles that govern conduct on the Sabbath day: (1) keep the Sabbath day holy and (2) do good on the Sabbath. These two simple principles replaced a myriad of rules and became the guiding principles for that sacred day.

Now, suppose your son says, “Dad, can I watch such and such a show on Sunday night?” Instead of letting him shift his agency and the decision-making process to you, you might shift it back to him and respond, “Son, will that show help you keep the Sabbath day holy?” In other words, will it help him become holy, meaning more like Christ. And the second principle you might ask your son is: “Will it help you do good and be good?” Then comes the moment of truth. How will he answer? If he has the spiritual integrity to discern between God’s will and his own, and the spiritual maturity to act on God’s will, even though it may be different than his own, then he is ready to be governed by principles, not rules.

If he is not ready, then parents may need to resort back to rules for a while. For example, the Lord gave to the early Saints the law of consecration. It was basically a principle that governed how they should use their wealth, time, and talents to build the kingdom of God. However, when the Saints were unable to fully live this principle, the Savior resorted to the law of tithing. This law is in part a rule (to give a fixed percentage, namely 10 percent) and in part a principle, namely that such 10 percent is to be paid on our annual “interest,” but we determine what the increase is (see D&C 119:4). No one is authorized to define “interest” in terms of gross or net or before tax or after tax. That part is left to the individual agency of every person. As we honor and live the law of tithing, it will help prepare us, like a schoolmaster, for the principle of consecration. This can be true of any rule, including rules about the Sabbath day—they are most useful when they serve as stepping-stones to ultimately living the celestial law of principles.

### Example 2

While I was presiding over the Canada Toronto East Mission, missionaries would often ask me what was appropriate to do on preparation day. The missionary handbook had a helpful list of things that were appropriate to do and a list of things not to do, such as no swimming, contact sports or horseback riding. But what might be the problem with such lists? Well, missionaries are creative, and they might desire to do something that would be inappropriate but not listed, such as attending an amusement park, or, on the other hand, fail to do something appropriate, such as rendering service, because it is not listed.

We used to tell the missionaries that they needed to be obedient to the mission handbook but they could live a higher law if they chose—the law of principles. I would then ask them what they thought the governing principle should be for preparation day. They would usually respond that they should do those things physically, spiritually, and intellectually that would prepare them for their missionary responsibilities the rest of the week. I replied that if all missionaries could be trusted to live by that principle, we could probably do away with the lists of dos and don’ts for preparation day. But because not all missionaries can live the higher law, we have rules, which serve a useful purpose as interim guidelines.

### Example 3

A young man or young woman who has seriously transgressed but wants to go on a mission or to the temple might ask, “How long must I wait (and be good) before I can be called on a mission or receive a temple recommend?” A rule-based approach would prescribe a standard waiting period that might apply to everyone such as three months, six months, or a year. And sometimes it might be necessary to have such a standard. But what is the potential problem with such an approach? Repentance is not measured by time but a change of heart. Someone might abstain from a certain behavior for the designated waiting period but never have a change of heart.

I remember a father who approached me when I was a stake president and shared with me his great disappointment concerning his daughter’s lifestyle and accompanying attitude. She was headed down the wrong moral path and at one point said to her father, “I will clean up my act three months before it is time to go to the temple, and then I will be able to get a recommend.” I thought to myself that with that attitude she won’t get a recommend

from me or from any other stake president I know. Worthiness is not determined by time or by a five-step or seven-step process based on a set of rules. Rather, worthiness is determined by the state of one's heart. Repentance is not a checklist; rather it is turning our hearts and minds towards God until we, like the people of King Benjamin's day, "have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2). Suffice it to say, repentance is principle based, not rule driven.

#### *Example 4*

What should my appearance as a missionary be? A future missionary might ask, "Why do I have to remove my earrings? After all, I am morally clean and prepared to serve a mission." Or, "Why do I have to shave my beard? Didn't Brigham Young and other prophets have beards?" What might be the problem with such rules? What if a missionary wants to wear a Golden State Warriors hat or flip-flops when he goes tracting because there are no rules to prohibit such conduct?" How many end runs are there in a mission governed only by rules?

On one occasion, I had a young man come to me to discuss a mission. He was twenty-three years of age and seeking to change his life. He had an earring in each ear. My first thought was to tell him that he could not wear earrings and serve a mission. After all, it was against the rules. Then I thought that if I taught him the governing principle, he might understand the "why" behind the rule. We read in 1 Corinthians 8 (see also Acts 16:1–4), where the Apostle Paul speaks of those who will not eat meat that has been offered to idols. Paul explained that the decision to eat or not eat such meat has no moral consequence whatsoever. In other words, it is not a moral issue, "for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse" (1 Corinthians 8:8).

But then Paul gave this wise counsel which is expressed in the form of a principle: "But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours [eating meat] become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. . . . Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh . . . lest I make my brother to offend" (1 Corinthians 8:9, 13). In other words, are you going to be a stepping-stone or stumbling block to preaching the gospel?

After we read and discussed these verses, this future missionary nodded as if to say, "I understand." At the next interview, he returned—the earrings were gone. He understood that the earrings had no moral consequence in and

of themselves, but they could be a stumbling block for some who might not listen because of his appearance. He would live the higher law so he could be a stepping-stone, not a stumbling block to conversion. The principle helped him understand the reason behind the rule.

#### *Example 5*

Here is a related example—an actual case in point: "What kind of tie is appropriate to wear in the mission field?" We knew a young man who was in a mission where a rule stated that the missionaries could not have yellow or white in their tie—it was considered distracting to the eye. No doubt this rule was created with the best of intentions, but what might be the problem with such a rule? Well, what if these missionaries were watching conference and a General Authority came to the pulpit with yellow and white in his tie? What are they to think? Or what if a missionary wears a tie with pink hula dancers on it, but it has no yellow or white in it? Is that OK? What principle could solve these problems and similar ones that might arise? Perhaps it could be something like this: "Is this tie consistent with the dignity and sacredness of the message I am giving, or will it distract from such a message?" The inspired answer to that question will govern the correct choice.

I imagine that in most cases the Lord doesn't care about the color of a missionary's tie or whether it is striped or plaid or solid, just as long as it complies with the applicable principle, namely to enhance, not distract from our message.

The Lord follows this pattern again and again in the scriptures. To a group of missionaries returning from their labors, He said, "you may return . . . altogether, or two by two, as seemeth you good, it mattereth not unto me" (D&C 62:5). Concerning the journey of another group of missionaries, he said, "Let there be a craft made, or bought, as seemeth you good, it mattereth not unto me" (D&C 60:5). In other words, use your good judgment and get to the destination point as soon and as safely as you can. Later He said, "It mattereth not unto me . . . whether they go by water or by land; let this be as it is made known unto them according to their judgments hereafter" (D&C 61:22). One of my favorites is: "Wherefore, go ye and preach my gospel, whether to the north or to the south, to the east or to the west, it mattereth not, for ye cannot go amiss" (D&C 80:3). Underlying this counsel is this guiding principle: "These things [meaning these decisions] remain with you to do according to judgment [meaning common sense and divine

principles] and the directions of the Spirit” (D&C 62:7–8). It is as though the Lord is saying, “You have your agency, governing principles and the Spirit; you have all the tools you need, so now use your best judgment and figure out how to apply them in this specific situation.” And as you do so, it will result in your greatest growth.

### Example 6

Another example of the relationship between principles and rules relates to God’s moral law. Specifically, what is God’s moral law? We might all be able to create a list of immoral behavior, such as no fornication, no adultery, no viewing pornography, and so on. But a problem arises: What if we forget or neglect to list some behavior that is immoral? Is it then excusable to engage in such conduct?

King Benjamin understood this problem, for he said, “I cannot tell you all the things whereby ye may commit sin; for there are divers ways and means, even so many that I cannot number them” (Mosiah 4:29). In other words, trying to address each moral sin with a specific rule is a difficult, if not impossible, task. Perhaps the principle governing our moral actions might be: “The sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and a woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.” Another moral principle was given by the Lord in this way: “Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly,” followed by this glorious promise: “Then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distill upon thy soul as the dews from heaven” (D&C 121:45). What a marvelous and far-reaching principle. If our thoughts are the seeds or precursors of our actions, then we would never morally transgress if we garnished our thoughts with virtue unceasingly. There would be no necessity for any rules—this one principle governing our thoughts would suffice.

### Learning to Discover Principles

Not only is it important to teach principles, but it is also important for the learner to discover principles. Discovering a principle is being able to consider a body of knowledge, capture the essence of what is being said, and then articulate it in a clear, concise way. For example, a lawyer asked the Lord, “Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Rather than simply give the answer, the Savior invited the lawyer to consider the law and answer his own question: “What is written in the law? How readeest thou?” In other words,

the Lord was telling him to consider the scores of rules and commandments under the law of Moses and draw from them the essence of what is necessary to inherit eternal life. The lawyer replied, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself” (Luke 10:25–28). The Lord commended him for being able to succinctly state the heart of the law—the overriding principle.

This then led to a follow-up question from the lawyer: “And who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:29). Again, the Savior could have stated a rule, specifying the people whom we are to love. Instead, he told the parable of the good Samaritan, inviting the lawyer—and all of us—to deduce from it a principle to govern our relationships with others (see Luke 10:30–37).

One of the great skills of learning is to be able to do just that—to read the scriptures and then discover, extract and articulate the key principles from a parable, story, discourse, or from a vast store of knowledge that will provide the governing standards by which we should live.

Principles tell us *what we should do*, such as to keep the Sabbath day holy or feast upon the word of God, but the Holy Ghost teaches us *how to apply a given principle* in a given circumstance—how to keep the Sabbath day holy or how to feast upon the word of God. Principles and the Holy Ghost work in tandem—teaching us the correct doctrinal truth and how to apply it. A principle without the Holy Ghost becomes no more than a sterile or mechanical guideline. On the other hand, the Holy Ghost without principles may be restricted in His ability to direct us. The more we understand and embrace eternal principles, the greater room and flexibility we give the Holy Ghost to help us apply such principles to specific situations in our lives.

Like Joseph Smith, may we learn and teach correct principles whenever and wherever possible and thus promote greater agency and growth among those we teach. I bear my personal witness of the power of principles in my life as taught by the Savior, our beloved prophets, inspired teachers and my goodly parents. **RE**

### Notes

1. John Taylor, “The Organization of the Church,” *Millennial Star*, 15 November 1851, 339.
2. Boyd K. Packer, “Teaching the Scriptures,” in *Teaching Seminary: Preservice Readings* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 74.
3. Richard G. Scott, “Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge” (Brigham Young University devotional, Aug. 17, 1993), speeches.byu.edu.
4. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign* or *Liabona*, November 2010, 129.