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Balance

Robert L. Backman

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Balance

Robert L. Backman

My dear young brothers and sisters, this is a privilege for me to be here among you. It brings back so many fond memories and some not-so-fond days in law school. I saw some of you come in with young children, and I thought back to my days in law school. I had three children by the time I was through with law school. I guess I attribute the loss of my hair to that.

I will never forget, as we finished our law school, we started exam week, and my wife was seriously ill. She was so ill that I thought she was dying. The night before exams started, we had to get the ambulance to come for her, because she was hemorrhaging. I piled into the ambulance with her and my law books, went up to the hospital, and wondered all night whether she was going to live or die. I had to go up the next morning and start my exams. When we finished our exams that week, I broke out in hives from head to toe. That was my introduction to the practice of law.

It has been a most pleasant and wonderful career. I commend all of you who are seeking to become legal scholars and practitioners and promise you a rich and wonderful adventure ahead of you. I want you to know that law school is worth it, and the light at the end of the tunnel becomes brighter as you go along. The wonderful experiences you have when you can share your knowledge and understanding of the law and what this great country is built upon will redound to your benefit often, believe me.

I am honored to be here with you. I am honored to be here with my younger brother [Professor James Backman]. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to spend much time with him since he was plucked away from the law practice by Dean Rex Lee many years ago. I am also grateful to be here with Scott Cameron, who was a member of our firm when I was called to be a General Authority of the Church. So I feel I am among friends. Also, Dean Reese Hansen and my brother came down here to BYU the same year; I have

known him for a long time and admired him. I want you to know how fortunate you are to have the people who are teaching you in the Law School.

I wonder what I could say to you that could be worthwhile. I hope you will let an old man talk a little bit about his own experiences, some things I think might be important for you as you embark upon this great adventure that lies ahead of you.

There is only one short verse in all the Bible that describes the 18 years of the Savior's life—the years between his visit in the temple with the rabbis as a boy of 12 and the beginning of his ministry at the age of 30—but that one verse gives us a marvelous pattern to follow in obtaining a rich, happy, fulfilling life: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man” (Luke 2:52). I take that to mean that Jesus Christ grew mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially. On the threshold of your adult life as you are, it is an appropriate time, it seems to me, for you to ponder what you are doing, what you can do to achieve that kind of balance in your lives.

How vital such balance is was shown by the man who was driving a huge truck full of lumber. The truck had a powerful motor with plenty of horsepower, the frame was well built, and it held all the lumber that could be stacked on its mighty bed. But a strange thing happened to that truck as it pulled out toward the street. Just as the rear wheel dipped into the gutter, the entire front end of the truck reared up off the ground. The heavy load of lumber on the truck bed teetered slowly toward the ground. It was an odd sight to see the driver sitting in the cab frantically turning the front wheels back and forth but unable to steer his vehicle. The power was still there, but he couldn't do anything with it. He lost control, not because of the size of the load of lumber or the lack of power in the vehicle, but because the load was simply misplaced.

Sometimes, like the load of lumber, our lives get out of balance. Before we know it, our load controls us. We lose the ability to steer and to direct our lives. The remedy is to grow mentally, physically, socially, and spiritually—to become well-rounded squares, so to speak.

In our own dispensation, the Lord gave us this direction:

Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may 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;

Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms—[And this interesting verse:]

That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you (D&C 88:78–80).

Abbreviating that challenging passage of scripture, the Lord has told us to keep balance in our lives by being instructed in all things, “that ye may be prepared . . . to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you.” None of you here knows what life has in store, its length, its breadth, what experiences lie ahead of you. Looking back on my own life, I marvel at the rich adventure I’ve enjoyed, and I thank God for the balance I’ve been able to maintain.

I well remember my first day in law school at the University of Utah, as the dean (Dean Leary, a frightening man, a long, spare man, with less hair than I have, a very ruddy complexion, and small glasses that he wore on the end of his nose) looked at us, a class of new law students, and thundered, “The law is a jealous mistress! You will have no time for anything else. It must be first in your life.”

I resolved then that I was going to prove him wrong, and I did. I am grateful for my education. I thoroughly enjoyed my law practice, but I enjoyed it because of other interests I maintained. I love my family; I recognize at this stage in my life they really are my wealth, and little else counts.

When I was a boy of 12, my dad was called to be the president of the South African Mission. We left our home in Salt Lake City and journeyed out to that far-off land. We stopped in London to wait for a ship to take us down the west coast of Africa to our home in Capetown. While we were there we attended a testimony meeting in a branch in south London. To give you some idea of how long ago it was, the missionary who escorted us was one Gordon B. Hinckley, who was then serving as a missionary in England. During that meeting, my father stood to bear his testimony and said something very important. He said, “When you come right down to it there are only two things in life that really count: the gospel of Jesus Christ and your family.”

You know, young friends, the older I get, the more I realize the truth in what my dad was saying. It is hard for me to separate my family from the gospel, the gospel from my family. They’re so held in esteem by me. I love my family.

I have served my community. Jim mentioned the fact that I have been active in Scouting. I have had some very rich experiences just out of that little bit of service. I challenge you to find ways to serve that way.

I will never forget when I came back from serving as a mission president in the Northwestern States Mission. I was trying to get back into my law practice and trying to get my life back in order when I received a telephone call from the chair of a political party in the state of Utah, asking me to run for the state legislature. I said, “No, I don’t want to do that. I have been away

for three years; I've got to put things back in order, and I need some time for myself." I continued with one excuse after another.

He finally stopped me and said, "Yes, you have done all of that, but what have you done for your community lately?" I couldn't answer very well. So I enjoyed four wonderful years in the House of Representatives in this state—an experience I would wish on any of you because of the genius of this government of ours that I love so much.

I have had many callings in the Church. I lamented every release I received, because I thoroughly enjoyed every assignment. I challenge you to do the same.

I try to keep myself physically fit. I walk regularly; I play squash and golf. I have attempted to be a well-rounded square. It has paid rich dividends, dividends beyond my imagination. The challenge I extend to you, my young friends, is for you to maintain balance in your life—to keep growing mentally, physically, socially, and spiritually.

To grow mentally, of course, is to increase in wisdom as Christ did. What opportunities lie ahead of you if you take advantage of your educational blessings here at Brigham Young University! I am so grateful to live in a land and at a time when all of us can have an education. I am so grateful for the gospel, which encourages us to learn, study, grow, magnify, increase, expand, and progress forever. Isn't that a glorious idea to think about? Consider the impact these inspired statements have on us as members of God's Church: "The glory of God is intelligence" (D&C 93:36). "It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance" (D&C 131:6). Man can be saved no faster than he gains knowledge.¹

Brigham Young told us how important our mental development is:

I tell you in a few words what I understand "Mormonism" to be. . . .

It embraces every fact there is in the heavens and in the heaven of heavens—every fact there is upon the surface of the earth, in the bowels of the earth, and in the starry heavens; in fine, it embraces all truth there is in all the eternities of the Gods. . . .

"Mormonism" embraces all truth that is revealed and that is unrevealed, whether religious, political, scientific, or philosophical.²

God expects us to use our minds, to stretch our intellect, to think. Some people would rather die than think, and many do. I envy you; the years are ahead of you. There are so many frontiers yet to be conquered by you. Think of the vistas that are open for you: the exploration of space, computers, medical advances, transportation, communication, social and moral revolutions, the expansion of God's church, the search for truth—all the challenges facing the world and mankind. What a time to be alive!

In 1972, after landing on an area of the moon named for René Descartes (the 17th century mathematician and philosopher), astronaut

John W. Young chose a quotation from Descartes to summarize the meaning of that space flight. Listen to his words: “There is nothing so removed from us as to lie beyond our reach or so hidden that we cannot discover it.” Isn’t that exciting?

Yes, my young brothers and sisters, I urge you to soak up all the education you can in this singular learning environment. Stretch your minds and skills as far as you can, but beware. Heed the counsel given to us by the prophet Nephi:

O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish.

But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God (2 Nephi 9:28–29).

I can give you no better advice than that given to Henry Eyring, the famous scientist, by his father, as Henry left the farm to attend his freshman year at the University of Arizona. His father said:

So you’re going to Tucson to study science, eh? Well now, that’s what you want to do, isn’t it? I don’t know much about science, son, but I know quite a bit about some other things. I do know the Lord spoke to the Prophet and that the gospel is true. I know our gospel teaches truth regardless of its source. Now, I’ve tried to tell you the way things look to me, and perhaps sometimes I’ve told you things that don’t exactly jibe with the truth. If I have, just discard those things. In this Church you don’t have to believe anything that isn’t true. If you want to be a scientist, son, you hit it just as hard as you can. You’re going to hear some things up there that don’t exactly jibe with what you have learned in Sunday School, but don’t worry about it. Just keep an open mind and truth will eventually work its way to the surface. I don’t worry about how much you learn. Study all the science you can, and remember your prayers and don’t profane and live in such a way that you will feel comfortable in the company of good people, then mother and I will feel good about your going. Don’t you worry about the gospel, son. It will stand the test of all truth.³

Develop physically, increase in stature as Christ did. Unfortunately, our worldly way of life is gradually and quietly, but steadily, robbing us of physical health and robust fitness—cars, TV, spectator sports, rich foods, drinking, smoking, drugs, immorality, emphasis on luxury, hedonism, and the doctrine that pleasure is the highest good. Someone described our life-style as GIGO (garbage in, garbage out). How grateful I am for the Word of Wisdom. Practicing its saving principles has been a real blessing in my life. I assure you that the Lord was speaking to us when he gave the glorious promise contained in the 89th section of the Doctrine and Covenants, which we often overlook as we talk about the Word of Wisdom:

And all saints who remember to keep and do these sayings, walking in obedience to the commandments, shall receive health in their navel and marrow to their bones;

And shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures;

And shall run and not be weary, and shall walk and not faint.

And I, the Lord, give unto them a promise, that the destroying angel shall pass by them, as the children of Israel, and not slay them (D&C 89:18–21).

Please remember that these bodies of ours are the tabernacles of our spirits, which have come to us from God. As we care for them, bridle our passions, appetites, and thoughts, and take control of our lives, we will experience the promises God has made to us. We will achieve a balance that would be lacking without our self-discipline. How I pray that you great young people will be modern Daniels, as you develop physically by living the Word of Wisdom in all of its aspects and experience the promises God has made to you in return.

Notice how our physical development influences our mental growth and our social and our spiritual progress. Grow socially; increase in favor with man. I love these words of John Donne:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.⁴

We live in a society. The better adjusted we are to our society the happier we are going to be. If we are to have a better society, it will not be assembled in think tanks or by computers; it will be fashioned in the hearts of men; it will be found in seven simple words, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (D&C 59:6). That is a surefire formula for happiness, believe me. The Lord says, “Thou shalt love,” not “Thou shalt *try* to love.” Can love be commanded? Can we force ourselves to love? Someone asked me, “How can you love a neighbor you just don’t like?” The key is, how do we express love to ourselves?

We have a deep and continuing desire to stay alive, to stay well, to avoid hurt or physical danger. We want to have friends, to develop our capacity. We want to enjoy beauty. We want to be secure financially. We want to know who we are, where we came from, and where we are going. When we supply these and other basic wants, we do it because we love ourselves. Now, if we love our fellowman, friend or enemy, we develop within ourselves a desire to help them realize the same things we want for ourselves. This desire for others can be willed; it can be developed; it can be commanded. What it takes is getting to know them and accepting them as

our brothers and sisters, with the same divine potential to become like our Father in Heaven that you and I have.

I love the words of Will Rogers: “I never hated a man I knew.” We best show our love for our neighbor by serving him. It’s no accident that the primary role of the priesthood of God is to serve our fellowman, and it’s no accident that we are happiest when we are serving. I don’t hesitate to tell you that your happiness will be commensurate with the service you render. So find ways to serve and be happy. There is no better place for service than in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. How badly God needs faithful young men and women who know who they are, where they came from, why they are here, and where they are going. The Church is just gathering steam, my young friends, and in your lifetime you will experience some of the greatest events in the world’s history. Don’t let anyone sell the future short. You are going to be there.

Many years ago, I was called by President Harold B. Lee to be the president of the Aaronic Priesthood MIA. When he called me, he issued me a challenge that I never have gotten out of my mind. He said, “Bob, I challenge you to present a program to prepare this generation of youth to meet the Savior when he comes.”

Wow! You think of that. I don’t know whether he meant that in our lifetime we would see that great historical event for which we are all waiting. I do know that you and I can prepare for that event, whether we are here or not. We will have that opportunity of meeting our Lord and Savior. I challenge you to be where the Lord can find you, and many wonderful opportunities for service will lie ahead, and you will grow socially. One word of warning: we are to be *in* the world but not *of* the world.

When we become worldly, carnal, sensual, and devilish, we lose that important balance that is vital to our well-being. We find ourselves in monkey traps.

When I lived in South Africa, I remember hearing about how natives trapped monkeys. They simply took coconuts, knocked the tops off, and hollowed them out, with a hole in the top large enough for a monkey to get his paw in. Then they anchored the coconuts to the ground and put a peanut in the bottom of each one. The monkeys would smell those peanuts and, loving them as they do, would reach in and grab the peanuts. They would take the peanuts in their paws, but with doubled-up fists they couldn’t get their paws out of the holes. All the natives had to do was pick up those monkeys and put them into gunnysacks. They would bite and kick and scream and yell, but they would not let go of the peanuts, even to save their lives.

Do you know anyone who is caught in a monkey trap, who is worshipping false gods: position, fame, wealth, approval, success?

Success. I recently read Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, a tremendous book written by a man who suffered through the Holocaust,

saw his family killed in the ovens, and yet came out of it with a marvelous philosophy of life. Listen to what he says about this matter of success.

Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see in the long run—in the long run, I say—success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think about it.⁵

Isn't that an interesting comment, from a man who really did discover the secret of happiness? Remember that God has commanded us, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).

I pray that you will grow spiritually, in favor with God. Carol Lynn Pearson and Scott Whitaker wrote a beautiful poem concerning that:

O Man, ascending on your self-built step of steel,
 Raising hands in praise of your own bright artistry,
 Looking at your world through the audacious glass of newly conquered space
 With never a thought for tomorrow's consequences,
 Letting the material things of this world
 Shut out your view of a better one,
 Forever scurrying in a frenzy to acquire more than your neighbor,
 Neglecting the spiritual while perfecting the physical,
 Waving a worded banner of Utopian hopes,
 Never learning from the same words carved on the stones
 Of every century since words and stones and centuries began,
 Looking in vain for happiness that constantly eludes,
 Devising monuments to your own greatness;
 O man, ascending on your self-built step of steel.
 You forget the true purpose of life until too late,
 Until the harvest is past, the summer is ended, and
 Death, the stranger, is at your door.

Blessed with testimonies of the gospel of Jesus Christ, you and I understand the purpose of life and our eternal goals. Contrast that with the understanding of your friends outside the Church, who do not have a testimony of the gospel. That blessed testimony, my brothers and sisters, gives us the proper perspective and the motivation as we grow mentally, physically, and socially, and in favor with God. We have the truth, and we practice

virtue. That sets us apart from the rest of the world, which tries to find truth without getting virtue. Yes, we want you to get an education, to achieve academic excellence in the context of Latter-day Saint values. There is no end in the progress of a man or a woman who seeks the truth. President Harold B. Lee, in a talk to seminary teachers several years ago, said: “Drive your testimony deep into the rock like a stake, tie the rope of faith to it, and play it out as far as you can. When you feel yourself slipping, pull back into the stake, your testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

The Lord declared to us, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). All these things—God was speaking of all that he has. The blessings are unlimited for those who are faithful and true. The prophet Alma counseled his son Helaman in these words:

O, remember, my son, and learn wisdom in thy youth; yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God.

Yea, and cry unto God for all thy support; yea, let all thy doings be unto the Lord, and whithersoever thou goest let it be in the Lord; yea, let all thy thoughts be directed unto the Lord; yea, let the affections of thy heart be placed upon the Lord forever.

Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good; yea, when thou liest down at night lie down unto the Lord, that he may watch over you in your sleep; and when thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God; and if ye do these things, ye shall be lifted up at the last day (Alma 37:35–37).

Can you apply that to your studies here at the Law School? If you do these things, you will then study along with your law the holy scriptures, the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. You will pray earnestly and sincerely from the heart, seeking guidance for your life, building your faith in God, understanding your relationship to him. You will fast purposefully, thoughtfully, prayerfully, and regularly. You will live his holy principles and commandments, which is really the true test of your faith. You will respond to calls to serve in his kingdom, experiencing the joy that comes from such service. You will sustain and follow your leaders, confident that they are inspired in their callings. You will bear witness of the gospel through your words and actions, sharing the truth with your fellowman. You will seek his Holy Spirit knowing that the things of God are only understood by the Spirit of God. You will be honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, doing good to all men. You will love your neighbors as yourself, even those you don’t like. You will continue to seek anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy. You will be a devoted Latter-day Saint throughout your life.

My young brothers and sisters, our victory over Satan is dependent upon our being taught the gospel of Jesus Christ, in experiencing those

gospel principles in our lives, in developing firm, unshakable testimonies, in showing that the gospel is the solution to our problems and the problems of the world. As one of your leaders who loves you dearly, I challenge you to find the anchor that will bless you forever, to maintain the balance in your individual lives that will lead to rich, full years of service and happiness here and the glorious promise of eternal lives and exaltation hereafter.

I will never forget when I was in your shoes. I came to law school fresh out of the army after the Second World War. I had been away from my studies for a long, long time. I resolved as I was aboard the troop ship on my way home from the war that I was going to concentrate all my efforts on my law studies. I came home with that intention and believed what Dean Leary later said to me when I went to law school, that the law was a jealous mistress and I would have no time for anything else. With the savings I had from being overseas, not spending any money while I was in combat, my wife and I bought a little house. One of the first things I did was to go to downtown Salt Lake City to find a job so we could sustain ourselves. I boarded the bus, because we didn't have a car, and rode downtown. Wouldn't you know it? A man sat next to me on the bus who turned out to be the bishop of our ward. Before I got off that bus, I was the deacons quorum adviser of that ward. Gone were all my good intentions to concentrate on the law only.

I'm so grateful for that bishop; I'm so grateful for the direction of my Lord and Savior. I'm so grateful he saved me from an unbalanced life and gave me a rich assurance that life can be beautiful. You can make a good living; you can enjoy the blessings of the law; and you can enjoy the blessings of a great society and service to your fellowman. I still keep that balance of which the Lord spoke to all of us. My young friends, will you accept the challenge to be instructed in all things, that you may be prepared to magnify the calling whereunto God has called you? I assure you he has. Sitting in front of me are the future leaders of this Church and of this and other communities: political leaders, business leaders, lawyers of note, jurists, and great citizens of this nation. God bless you to experience life to the fullest, by keeping the balance that will assure you that you are a son or a daughter of God, that he loves you, knows you, and knows the experiences you need to come back into his presence. He will grant you those adventures if you place yourself in his care, seeking first things first, and maintaining a balance in your life.

Remember what the scriptures said, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man." I could wish nothing better for each of you at this stage in your life. I love you as brothers and sisters in the gospel of Jesus Christ. I pray his blessings upon each of you and all you undertake to do. As difficult as it may seem, I want you to know right now you are as much alive as you will ever be. So enjoy every day what you are

doing. Make the most of it, and let the Lord reach out and touch you, bless you, and enlarge you with the capacity to do all he asks you to do.

This fireside address was given at the BYU Law School on March 24, 1991. Reprinted from the Clark Memorandum, Fall 1991, 12–19.

Robert L. Backman received his LL.B. from the University of Utah in 1949. He served as a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy 1978–92 and was named an emeritus General Authority in 1992.

Notes

1. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 217.
2. *Journal of Discourses*, 9:149.
3. *The Search for Truth in Science and Religion* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1961), 13–14.
4. John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), no. 17.
5. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985), 16–17.