Principles of Spiritual Self-Reliance
Prepared by Vern R. Johnson for the priesthood leadership session
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Self-reliance is normally discussed in the context of resources. That is providing food and shelter for one’s self and family. But we cannot ignore social, emotional and spiritual self-reliance. These represent the strengths members need to cope with the everyday problems that are presented by their spiritual and temporal lives.

We cannot be afraid of becoming spiritually and emotionally self-reliant, even though it is the opposite of turning to others (including God) for answers to life’s questions.

The fundamental principles of temporal salvation include two concepts: providing for oneself and one’s family (referred to as self-reliance) and serving others who are in need. The first principle, that of self-reliance, comes from a fundamental doctrine of the Church: that of free agency. As stated by President Marion G. Romney¹, “Self-reliance implies the individual development of skills and abilities and then their application to provide for one’s own needs and wants.”

But relying on one’s self seems counter to seeking priesthood or divine guidance for what we do. It is counter, and that’s the point. The gospel is the foundation to our learning, but once we have learned the principles of the gospel, that learning becomes the foundation for what we do. We no longer need guidance for what we do. In fact, if we were to be commanded in all things we would lose our free agency.

“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. 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 58:26-28)

The Lord directed us to study the scriptures and the best books produced by man. “…Seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.” (D&C 88:118) Elsewhere in the scriptures this is reaffirmed with a warning, “…to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God.” (2 Ne. 9:29)

Church leaders have reiterated the need for independence and self-reliance in our day. President Gordon B. Hinckley has said, “We feel the need to emphasize with greater clarity the obligation for members of the Church to become more independent and self-reliant, to increase personal and family responsibility, to cultivate spiritual growth and to be more fully involved in Christian service.”

President Spencer W. Kimball said² that, “The responsibility for our spiritual, physical, emotional, social, and economic well being rests first upon ourselves, then upon our families, then upon the Church.” He added: “No true Latter-day Saint, while physically or emotionally
able will voluntarily shift the burden of his own or his family’s well-being to someone else. So long as he can, under the inspiration of the Lord and with his own labors, he will supply himself and his family with the spiritual and temporal necessities of life.”

What does it mean to be self-reliant in spiritual things? President Romney teaches us that it means that we should strive to develop the spiritual strength that will enable us to resolve difficult problems in our lives and strengthen others in their times of spiritual need.

Elder Boyd K. Packer⁴ said: “We have been taught to store a year’s supply of food, clothing, and, if possible, fuel… Can we not see that the same principle applies to inspiration and revelation, to the solving of problems, to counseling, and to guidance? We need to have a source of it stored in every home. …If we lose our emotional and spiritual independence, our self-reliance, we can be weakened quite as much, perhaps even more, than when we become dependent materially”

**Self-reliance provides the foundation needed for service**

Bishop Glenn L. Pace noted that, “The purpose of self-reliance is not just independence, but the freedom to serve that comes with independence.”

President Romney⁴ had this same thought in mind when he asked the question, “Can we see how critical self-reliance becomes when looked upon as the prerequisite to service, when we also know service is what Godhood is all about?” Then he answered, “Without self-reliance one cannot exercise these innate desires to serve. How can we give if there is nothing there? Food for the hungry cannot come from empty shelves. Money to assist the needy cannot come from an empty purse. Support and understanding cannot come from the emotionally starved. Teaching cannot come from the unlearned. And most important of all, spiritual guidance cannot come from the spiritually weak.”

To become Christ-like we must become self-reliant so we can serve others. But we must go beyond that and become leaders and teachers. Our assignment as leaders is to help those we serve learn to become self-reliant and serve others. It is not enough that we do it ourselves.

**The key to becoming a leader is to help those you lead to become self-reliant and serve others. This is a three-step process: 1) build a foundation of temporal and spiritual knowledge, 2) become self-reliant, and 3) help those you lead to become self-reliant. Each of these is reviewed below:**

1. **Study and gain knowledge of basic spiritual and temporal principles. (This is the foundation for all that you do.)**

You will need to progress from where you have the ability to gain spiritual and temporal knowledge that you can testify of or teach to others; to the point where you have the ability apply that knowledge as it is needed in situations you are facing, problems you are solving, or service that you are giving.
When we study the gospel in church we generally focus on gaining knowledge. We don’t usually spend much time learning to apply that knowledge to solve real-life spiritual or temporal problems. Life is not so nice; it makes us face those real problems. Thus we must continue to gain knowledge outside of our church classes.

2. **Become an independent learner so you can provide for yourself and your family and serve others. (You become self-reliant.)**

The welfare plan identifies the areas of self-reliance in which you need to become expert. These include:

- **Education** - Read, write, basic mathematics, gospel/temporal knowledge.
- **Health** - Word of wisdom, exercise, medical care, sanitation.
- **Employment** - Career knowledge/skills, suitable occupation, honest work.
- **Home storage** - Food, clothing, shelter.
- **Resource management** - Tithes, offerings, savings, provident spending, budget.
- **Social, emotional and spiritual strength** - Gospel study, faith in God, prayer, family, friends, goals.

Spiritual and intellectual development requires that you progress from being a student whose learning is directed by others; to the point where your learning is self-directed and focuses on your own needs. You will know you are becoming an independent learner when you find yourself committing to things based on your own judgment rather than on the advice of others.

Because of your previous experiences, you know all about being a student of the gospel and a student of temporal concepts, so let me discuss becoming an independent learner. That is: learning how to learn. This will cause a little distraction from our focus, but it is important enough to take that risk.

There are three ways that temporal or spiritual learning can take place:

- Another person can provide information for you (teacher, church leader, book, scriptures, church periodicals, etc.).
- You can gain information by personal observation or experience.
- You can reconsider already learned concepts by reflective thinking. Reflective thinking has to do with pausing, meditating, reflecting, and considering what you are trying to learn and what you already know. It has to do with seeking meanings, discovering gaps in your learning, and restructuring your memory to better match your future needs.

I think we all understand the first two of these learning techniques: learning from others and from our experiences. But, there are some who do not truly understand the third: which is the most important of all. Some of us read the scripture, “Ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you,” and think we can just ask for answers to our problems and we will find someone who will provide them, or at least an experience that will provide the needed insight. But revelation often requires more of us. In fact, Elder Packer has indicated that if we limit ourselves to learning from others and from our experiences we can lose our emotional and spiritual independence, our self-reliance.
The Lord said to Oliver Cowdery, and it has meaning for all of us: “Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong.” (D&C 9:7-9.)

Elder Packer indicated that he understood the power of learning by reflective thinking when he said³, “It is critically important that you understand that you already know right from wrong, that you’re innately, inherently, and intuitively good. When you say, ‘I can’t! I can’t solve my problems!’ I want to thunder out, ‘Don’t you realize who you are? Haven’t you learned yet that you are a son or a daughter of Almighty God? Do you not know that there are powerful resources inherited from Him that you can call upon to give you steadiness and courage and great power?’ When you have a problem, work it out in your own mind first. Ponder on it and analyze it and meditate on it. Read the scriptures. Pray about it. I’ve come to learn that major decisions can’t be forced. You must look ahead and have vision. What was it the prophet said in the Old Testament? ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish.’” (Prov. 29:18.)

Elder Packer then restated this concept³ by saying, “We have all been taught that revelation is available to each of us individually. The question I’m most often asked about revelation is, ‘How do I know when I have received it?’ Then he responded to this question with another question, “First, do you go to the Lord with a problem and ask Him to make your decision for you? Or do you work, read the revelations, and meditate and pray and then make a decision yourself? Measure the problem against what you know to be right and wrong, and then make the decision. Then ask Him if the decision is right or if it is wrong. Remember what He said to Oliver Cowdery about working it out in your mind…. If we foolishly ask our bishop or branch president or the Lord to make a decision for us, there’s precious little self-reliance in that…. He continued by saying, “I think I should mention one other thing, and I hope this won’t be misunderstood. We often find…people who will pray with great exertion over matters that they are free to decide for themselves…. Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps the Lord just plain doesn’t care? …[Of course] there are some things he cares about very much. Those are the things that count.”

From the above there are some things we can conclude about our personal learning:

• Keep studying and learning as much as you can from other people.
• Try new things and seek experiences from which you can learn. When you face new challenges, even when there is someone who can tell you how to do things, make sure you ask yourself why they are done that way so you can learn from all of your experiences.
• Finally, and most important -- take time to pause, reflect, and ponder on what you know about the important aspects of the projects on which you are working whether they are temporal or spiritual. Determine which parameters are the most important, what you know about them, and what you don’t know about them. Don’t be afraid to seek help regarding
important things that you don’t know, but before you ask for help take some time to think them through yourself. Relate them to what you do know and see how close you can get to the answers before you seek help. Then based on what you conclude is best, seek guidance through prayer or by consultation with someone else. Yes, this can be very stressful. But that is OK, the stress will help you to learn. Elder Packer has instructed us\(^3\) that those who follow this approach will find their abilities added upon. He said that, “…The Lord is very generous with the freedom He gives us. The more we learn to follow the right, the more we are spiritually self-reliant, the more our freedom and our independence are affirmed. “If ye continue in my word,” he said, “then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:31-32)

3. **Help those you lead to become self-reliant and serve others. (This is where your leadership really begins to have a purpose.)**

When you first begin work on a job, or accept your first church assignment, you will probably be happy to serve as an apprentice who works according to the guidance of others. Then you will feel accomplished when you become recognized as an individual contributor who no longer needs guidance, but who has become self-reliant. Don’t settle for that. To be a leader you need to progress from where the sphere of your influence is basically yourself to the point where you influence the work of others. You don’t just serve them, but you influence their actions. Then you will really be able to make a difference.

And what should you influence them to do? The answer is easy. You help them become more Christ-like. That is, you help them become self-reliant and serve others like you do. One of the three purposes of the gospel is to perfect the saints. As a leader in the gospel your duty is to perfect those in your stewardship by influencing them to become self-reliant and serve others. In fact, that should be your main focus.

By the way, you should understand that self-reliance is not limited to church and family. Follow these same three steps in your professional life and you will experience significant professional rewards!

**Bibliography**