



R.T. BARRETT

Leadership Lessons from the Life of Dallin H. Oaks

RICHARD E. TURLEY JR.

Over the last century or so, several men with legal training have been called to be apostles in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The J. Reuben Clark Law Society takes its name from one of these men. The Church's current First Presidency includes another, President Dallin H. Oaks, whose biography I was privileged to write recently.

PORTRAIT BY ROBERT T. BARRETT

President Oaks's legal credentials are well known to this group. He graduated from Brigham Young University and went to the University of Chicago Law School on scholarship. There he distinguished himself, graduating near the top of his class as editor-in-chief of the law review. He accepted a job with the largest law firm in Chicago before serving for a year as law clerk to Chief Justice Earl Warren of the United States Supreme Court. Declining the Chief's offer to stay another year, he returned to his Chicago firm, where the senior partners fast-tracked him for partnership.

He left the firm to teach at the University of Chicago Law School, where he became a full professor at the young age of thirty-two. He excelled as a teacher, and his scholarship catapulted him to national prominence. While just in his 30s, he became acting dean of the law school. While still in his 30s, he served as executive director of the American Bar Foundation, the research arm of the American Bar Association.

At age 38, he became president of Brigham Young University. Following a remarkable period of leadership there, he became a justice of the Utah Supreme Court while still in his 40s. During that time, his name appeared on published lists of potential United States Supreme Court appointees. A US deputy attorney general asked Dallin if he would consider an appointment to the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, a stepping-stone to the nation's highest court. Dallin declined and instead supported the appointment of his associate Antonin Scalia, who ascended to the United States Supreme Court in 1986.

In declining the DC Circuit post, Dallin relied on a spiritual impression he had received in the temple when considering whether he should serve on the Utah Supreme Court. He and his wife June had sat in the celestial room of the temple, praying quietly by themselves.

"As I finished," Dallin recorded, "this thought flooded my mind, being repeated over and over: 'Go to the court, and I will call you from there.'" June "had confirming thoughts and expressed her willingness to make whatever sacrifices are necessary."¹

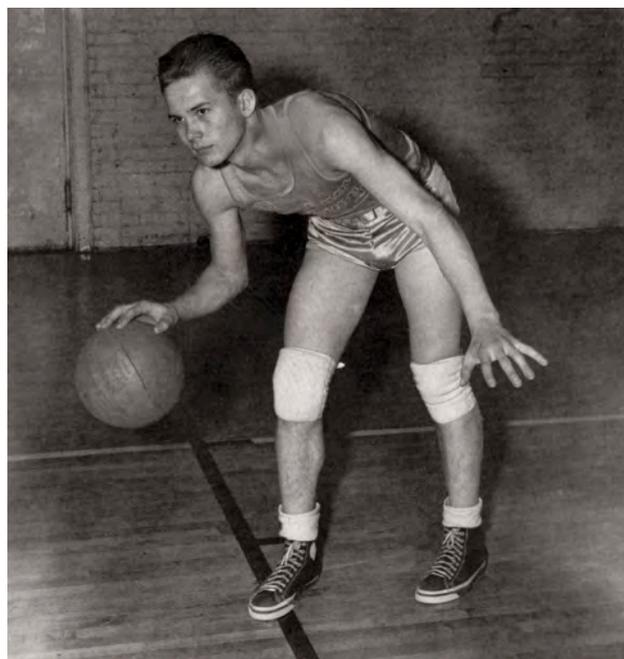
In April 1984, while serving on the Utah Supreme Court, the spiritual promise was fulfilled. He received a phone call from President Gordon B. Hinckley of the First Presidency, who told Dallin he "was called to be a member of the Council of the Twelve."²

"My life," Dallin replied, "is in the hands of the Lord, and my career is in the hands of His servants."³

Less than two years later, in December 1985, Elder Oaks cold-called me to go to lunch with him. He did not know me but relied on spiritual impressions he had received. By the end of the week, I had been asked to leave my legal practice to serve as managing director of the Church Historical Department, which he helped oversee.

At age 29, I became an associate of this great leader, and tonight I wish to recount a few lessons I have learned while working with him for three and half decades. In so doing, I will quote liberally from the biography.

*Richard E. Turley Jr.,
biographer of
Dallin H. Oaks and
former managing
director of the Church
History, Family
History, Public
Affairs, and
Communication
Departments of
The Church of Jesus
Christ of Latter-day
Saints, delivered
this keynote address
at the J. Reuben
Clark Law Society
Leadership Confer-
ence on Septem-
ber 30, 2021, at
Aspen Grove, near
Provo, Utah.*



Dallin on the B.Y. High basketball team

¶ In the Lord's Work, the Power Is Greater than the Obstacles

Early in his career, Dallin learned a key leadership principle from one of his greatest mentors:

"In Chicago during much of law school," he remembered, "I served as elders quorum group leader and in that capacity attended stake leadership meetings and came under the influence of stake president (and lawyer) John K. Edmunds." Dallin found in President Edmunds a role model.

"This remarkable man had a profound influence on my spiritual growth," Dallin wrote. "His example and words, which never failed to inspire and motivate me, had a uniquely powerful influence in helping me set my feet unwaveringly on the gospel path during the often-troubling years of graduate study." President Edmunds taught him, "When you are involved in the work of the Lord, the obstacles before you are never as great as the power behind you."⁴

This principle is like that taught by a prophet of God in 2 Kings 6:15-16, which recounts:

And when the servant of the man of God [Elisha] was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do?

And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. [Emphasis added]

Over his long period of service, President Oaks has fearlessly accepted whatever assignment he has been given, knowing that whatever obstacles he would face could be overcome with the Lord's help if it was His will.

¶ Do Not Overestimate Yourself; Learn from Others

As people gain success in their chosen field, they sometimes struggle with pride. Dallin, however, learned early on how important it was not to overestimate himself and instead to learn from those around him. As I explain in his biography:

In March 1956, as Dallin was nearing the end of his second year of law school, he learned that the law review's board of editors had selected him editor-in-chief for the next year. . . .

But his selection to "the top spot," as he described it, came with a humbling warning. When the editor-in-chief he was replacing trained him in his new duties, he told Dallin that he was chosen to be editor-in-chief because of his leadership skills but wanted him to know "that I should not overestimate my qualifications to the extent of overruling" another more knowledgeable editor "in the areas where he was my superior."

It was a good lesson, and Dallin took it to heart. He would come to be known as one who worked well with others and cultivated a spirit of cooperation among those with whom he labored.⁵

¶ Learn to Live with Perpetual Burdens

In every service field, including the law, success invites opportunities that can impose a heavy burden on the recipient. One way to handle the problem is to try reducing the load. Dallin, however, learned how to live with the perpetual burdens that come with talented leadership. In law school, for example, he accepted the role of editor-in-chief even though he knew it might cost him his current position at the top of his law school class. After agreeing to the new responsibility,

[h]is grades slipped, and a classmate without heavy responsibility on the law review squeaked past him for the top grade-point average in the graduating class. But Dallin was right behind him and received the added benefits of juggling what amounted to almost a full-time job on top of schoolwork. "In addition to the great value of editorial work," he wrote, law review leadership "forced you to learn how to do your schoolwork in less time than you would otherwise lavish upon it." The skills

Dallin as US Supreme Court law clerk, 1957-58



required to live with perpetually heavy work burdens were valuable ones that would serve him later in life.⁶

¶ Faith Can Help You Accomplish the Impossible

Lawyers who join firms usually hope to be made partners, which often requires working extremely hard. Balancing the heavy work of law practice with a Church calling can require great faith, as it did in Dallin's case:

In early 1961, [he] was invited to lunch by a man he admired greatly, Chicago Stake President John K. Edmunds, himself a practicing lawyer. Over lunch, President Edmunds called Dallin to serve a stake mission and to be a counselor in the stake mission presidency. [His wife] June's earlier premonitions meant he shouldn't have been surprised, but he was. "I told him," Dallin wrote, that "I couldn't have been any more surprised . . . if he had asked me to be the

staff physician in a hospital. I told him I'd never turned down a Church job and that I wasn't going to start now, but . . . did he know that he was calling a man to a position of leadership in missionary work who had never been on a mission?"

Yes, President Edmunds answered, both he and the stake mission president were aware of that, and both felt confident he was the person for the job. In extending the call, Dallin wrote, President Edmunds told him the calling "would require forty hours of proselyting per month, plus gospel study and other time—equivalent to at least three to four evenings per week."

Since Dallin's heavy load at the firm already kept him at work three or four evenings a week, the calling required a great exercise of faith. "I couldn't see how I could accept this calling and still keep up with my law practice," Dallin agonized. "Yet I could not say no to a calling that I knew to be from the Lord, especially when that calling came through a servant of the Lord who had wielded such a powerful influence in teaching me righteous principles. Gathering all my faith, I accepted the call." . . .

. . . Logically speaking, it did not seem possible for him to fulfill his Church calling and perform well at the law firm. But he came to recognize "the unusual—even miraculous—blessings that come to those who serve the Lord."

After just two weeks of missionary service, he testified to his mother, "I am deriving great happiness from this work, and I know the Lord is blessing me to accomplish my legal work with greater efficiency so that I can give my full devotion to His service." By the end of March, he reported to loved ones: "My missionary work continues at [a] fearful pace. . . . My whole day is upside down already, and my primary devotion is . . . to my missionary work, with law being secondary. Yet I'm getting my work done."

"Though I was devoting less time to law firm work," Dallin later reflected, "my advancement in the firm and my success in my work seemed to accelerate rather than decline." . . .

. . . "Feeling the Lord magnify me professionally as I sought to serve Him," Dallin concluded, "solidified my commitment to serve the Lord first, knowing that I could do more professionally in part of my time with His help than in all of my time without it."⁷

Heavy Leadership Burdens May Be Preparation for Greater Work

Accepting heavy leadership burdens may be preparation for later service, as Dallin learned when he became a law professor:

In the spring of 1962, only six months after Dallin assumed his professorship at the University of Chicago, he found himself propelled into a prominent and difficult role when Dean Edward Levi of the law school became provost of the university. To help fill the vacancy created by Dean Levi's new appointment, Dallin was named associate dean of the law school, with two assistant deans reporting to him. Although Dallin willingly assumed the role, he did not relish it and hoped it would be just a temporary assignment. "Now don't make too much out of this," he wrote family members. "I'm getting out of it as quickly as a successor is appointed." Still, he couldn't help feeling he was being prepared for leadership in this role he had not sought.

Almost immediately, the role placed a heavy burden on him. "I find this position is no joke or façade," he exclaimed to family on May 6. "Edward Levi tells me he expects me to run things (as much as any dean can run a strong faculty, which isn't much)." On May 25, Dallin added, "This associate dean business has been really boiling along this past two weeks. . . . And it's bound to get worse before it gets better.

"Along with all the rest," he reported, "I've been putting in a heavier than average missionary schedule: over fifty hours of proselyting each month for the past three months, in addition to about fifteen or twenty hours of mission administrative time."⁸

He felt a prompting that his time as associate dean was training for some other work later in life, and it proved highly valuable when he became president of Brigham Young University and served in subsequent leadership roles.



President Oaks and other BYU administrators

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sionally in
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Rely On the Spirit

Great spiritual leaders often learn early in life about the importance of relying on the Spirit, even if doing so requires the exercise of great faith, a lesson Dallin learned while serving in a stake presidency in Chicago:

“This service in the stake presidency,” he reflected, “was a period of great growth in faith, spirituality, and experience in Church administration . . . with all of its challenges in interviewing, counseling, planning, speaking, and leading. I learned a great deal from my fellow workers and had many choice spiritual and social experiences.” . . .

In preparing the many talks he had to give, Dallin learned to pray and jot down the thoughts that came to mind. “This happened so many times,” he wrote, that “it became commonplace, and I would not begin to prepare a talk until I had this experience to direct me.” Once the inspiration did not come before he left for a meeting where he was to speak. “I began my drive, feeling vulnerable, but trusting in the Lord,” he wrote. As he approached his destination many miles from his home, the inspiration came: Speak about your experiences in Chicago’s criminal courts.

“I was surprised to receive this impression,” he recorded, “since I had always avoided building my talks around personal experiences, preferring a less personal doctrinal or practical theme. I had never referred to these experiences in a public meeting, but now I had a strong impression that I could do so, and several examples came to mind.”

Trusting in the inspiration, he wove his personal experiences into a gospel-centered talk and mentioned seeing young shoplifters prosecuted. “Afterwards,” he wrote, “a mother thanked me tearfully for being the means of answering her prayer. She told me that their teenage boy had been involved in shoplifting and that they had not been able to communicate with him on the wrongfulness of this practice. On learning that I was to be the speaker that Sunday evening, she had prayed fervently that I would say something to help their son with this problem. The boy was in the meeting, and I had spoken directly on that subject. . . . I have no doubt whatever that the Lord had used me as His instrument to answer her prayers. I was grateful I had heard and heeded His prompting.”⁹

Learn from Good Mentors

Good leaders often have great mentors, and Dallin had several in the roles he occupied while still in the field of law:

For Dallin, his experience at the [American Bar Foundation], a transitional leadership and administrative experience, taught him principles he would carry with him the rest of his life. He learned the most important concepts from the foundation’s board chairman, Lewis F. Powell, a past president of the American Bar Association who later became a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. “I had never served on a board or worked under the direction of a board, so this was an entirely new experience,” Dallin wrote. “I could not have had a better teacher than Lewis Powell. He was an expert at defining the respective responsibilities of a board and a professional staff. He was also brilliant at analyzing how to present matters to a board to obtain fruitful discussions and clear decisions to guide the staff.”¹⁰

Dallin would take what he learned from his mentors into subsequent leadership roles and apply them effectively there.

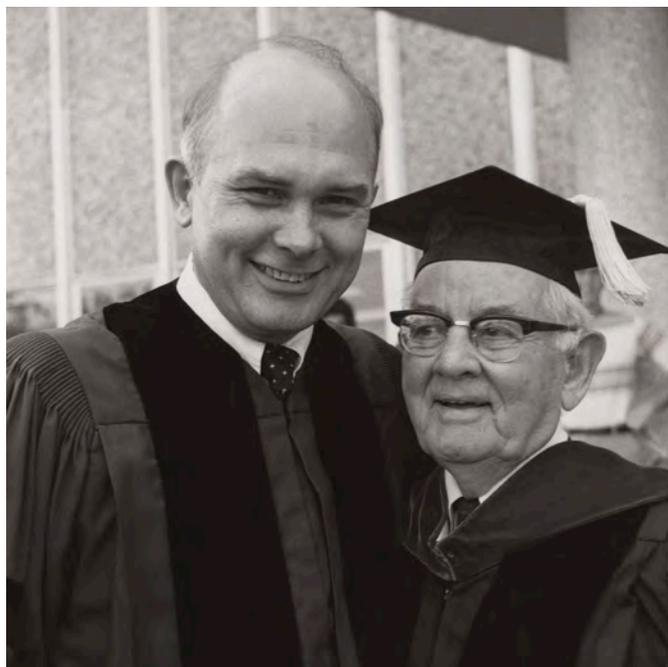
Be Profoundly Humble

“Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall,” warns Proverbs 16:18. Dallin took the humility he learned early in life with him as he accepted later leadership roles. The biography explains, for example, that when he became president of BYU,

[t]he fieldhouse erupted in applause as the faculty and students welcomed their new president with a standing ovation. He represented a new generation, having been just a freshman at BYU when Ernest Wilkinson began his service as school president.

Dallin answered the warm welcome with expressions of pride in his alma mater. “I am awed by the spiritual strength and intellectual potential of its student body,” he declared. “From personal experience, I know the superior quality of its faculty. All of you who share my feelings will understand why I have accepted the invitation to lead this great university, accepting it eagerly but with feelings of profound humility.”¹¹

BYU president Oaks with Church president Spencer W. Kimball



Be Willing to Laugh at Yourself

Good leaders don't take themselves too seriously and generally have a sense of humor and humility that allow them to laugh at themselves:

The Oaks children had grown up with a prominent father—a distinguished lawyer and professor who served in the leadership of their stake. While acknowledging that “Dad’s pretty important,” daughter Cheri said affectionately that, in their family, “he’s always been just Dad.”

Dallin’s new role at BYU catapulted him to even greater prominence than he’d had before, and the children had to adjust to not only a new place to live but a new way others saw them—as children of the president, a role they sometimes felt overshadowed their individuality. It got “a little old,” Cheri said. “You want to be liked for who you are and not who your dad is.”

Fourteen-year-old son Lloyd, for example, made a friend, and he was happy when the boy invited him to his house. But when the friend introduced him by saying, “Hey Mom, I’d like you to meet the president’s son,” Lloyd was crestfallen, telling a reporter who interviewed his family, “I thought he’d introduce me as Lloyd Oaks.”

Twelve-year-old Dallin D. told the same reporter, “I don’t tell anybody I’m related to him.”

The whole family laughed at these responses, and the elder Dallin repeated what an acquaintance told him about how Lloyd responded when asked if he was related to BYU’s president. “Well,” Lloyd answered artfully, “his grandfather and my great-grandfather were the same man.”¹²

Lloyd went on to become a lawyer and a judge, and his father retains his sense of humor to this day.

Lead by Example; Surround Yourself with Talented People

Great leaders lead by example and don't hesitate to surround themselves with talented people, as Dallin did at BYU:

“Absolutely extraordinary,” declared Academic Vice President Robert K. Thomas when describing President Dallin Oaks’s effect on BYU’s academic standards. “The high academic standards at this university are to a great degree attributed to President Oaks,” Thomas noted. “He set the tone of the university.” During the Oaks administration, accreditation reports became overwhelmingly favorable.

President Oaks’s voice on academics carried weight because of his own sterling academic background and his continued writing, teaching, and service on national boards and in the community. But he was the first to recognize that the achievements of his administration resulted not just from his leadership but also from the loyal and excellent work of a multitude of fellow leaders, especially Robert K. Thomas and Ben E. Lewis. Their familiarity with the faculty and administrators who reported to them, their knowledge of the university, and their superior administration and counsel to him were the most important contributors to his success as a new president coming from the outside.¹³

Defend the Right, Even If It’s Unpopular

It is easy to revel in success when it comes. But leadership is tested in the crucible, with the greatest leaders not hesitating to do what is right, even if it is unpopular:

But it was no laughing matter when leaders of the Western Athletic Conference in which BYU played announced that they had agreed with the Fiesta Bowl and CBS Television to hold the football bowl game on Christmas Sunday in 1977. With the Cougars likely contenders for the conference championship, the choice forced BYU and its athletes to either violate their standards by playing on the Sabbath or not participate in the championship game.



Elder Oaks at a BYU event

JOHN SNYDER

BYU promptly announced it would not play, and President Oaks criticized conference officials for their money-driven decision. “Because of our beliefs about the sacredness of the Sabbath, our athletic teams have never competed on Sunday, and never will,” the president resolved. He expressed regret “that the NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] is increasingly scheduling its competition for championships on Sunday and that it is apparently willing to certify bowl games on Sunday,” thereby disqualifying “some teams from competition because they adhere to a religious principle.”

Resisting conformity to worldly ideals and to pressure for all universities to be the same became a hallmark of the Oaks administration. In the fall of 1974, United States Vice President Nelson Rockefeller visited BYU, substituting for U.S. President Gerald Ford. The vice president read a message from President Ford that commended BYU “for its high standards of scholarship, morality, integrity, and patriotism.” He declared, “As the nation’s largest privately operated university prepares for its centennial celebration, it perpetuates an exemplary tradition.”

These words of praise from the nation's highest government officials, however, did not stop federal bureaucrats from trying to micro-manage BYU and force the private school into conforming as though it were a public institution. President Oaks spent a substantial portion of his administration using his legal and leadership skills to resist such pressures.¹⁴

Welcome Calls and Releases

Good leaders accept calls to leadership positions, receive releases graciously, and look forward to whatever life holds for them. Dallin had suggested to Church leaders that BYU rotate its presidents regularly, but his release came with little notice. Despite that, he responded with grace and hope for the future:

When asked, "What causes you to 'welcome' the release?" Dallin answered, "Mostly because it is good for the university to have regular turnover in its top leadership. At the personal level, June and I have six children and five grandchildren. They haven't seen a great deal of me during the last nine years. I look forward to having more time with them." He was happy to be freed of thankless administrative tasks, too. "Finally," he reflected, "I have missed having a private life."

Asked what he would miss most, he said the people. "As I conclude my nine years of service as president of Brigham Young University on July 31, 1980," he wrote to faculty, staff, and students, "I do so with a profound sense of gratitude for the extraordinary men and women of BYU. . . . It has been a great honor and blessing to serve as president of Brigham Young University. Whatever I do in the rest of my life, I will always be proud of this place and these people."¹⁵

Seek Candid Feedback

People who consider themselves the smartest person in the room generally do not make good leaders. Good leaders seek to tap the collective talents of those around them, which means seeking candid, constructive feedback, even if people seem hesitant to give it.

"It is hard for a General Authority to get an objective evaluation of his performance as a speaker," Elder Oaks wrote. "We are left to trust

our own feelings. . . . I am glad June is so candid in her reactions to my talks. She is my best and most helpful critic."

In the early days of Dallin's service as a General Authority, June noted the difference between his Church and non-Church talks. "I'm sure the Holy Ghost is present when he talks in a Church service—and it testifies to me the things he is saying are true," she wrote in her journal. But she felt this was missing in "his secular talks." She also felt that at times he tried to intellectualize his Church talks too much. "It seems to me," she recorded in her journal a year after his call, that "he is trying to be so scriptural and doctrinal he has lost some of the 'spirit.' I am yearning for the same feelings I used to feel when he spoke in Chicago" during his Church service there.

He loved it that she would give him "straight-up, candid evaluations of his performance in any setting" and that no matter how incisive the criticisms, they "were always loving and constructive." He trusted her motives. "She wanted me to be better and better, and she helped me more than I can explain," he wrote. Regardless of who else might hear or read what he had to say, she was, as he wrote in his 1982 journal, "my most critical and most valued audience."

As Elder Oaks labored over one of his earliest general conference addresses, he read the draft to June, who told him it was boring. "I redid it to try to make it more interesting," he wrote, "and she said it was a big improvement. She really helped me by this candid and constructive criticism. I can count on her to tell me what she really thinks."¹⁶

I know by observation that President Oaks does not give important addresses without seeking the input of people he trusts before and after speaking.

Prioritize Family

Extraordinary leaders are often extraordinarily busy, making it easy to slight family. President Oaks has been incredibly busy throughout his adult life but has made it a habit to prioritize family.

Oaks family, about 1966





Dallin and fellow justices of the Utah Supreme Court

As the father of six, grandfather of twenty-nine, and great-grandfather of more than sixty, Dallin H. Oaks loves the family. This has been one of the most frequent themes of his apostolic ministry. In his first year as an Apostle, he spoke at a fireside for parents on “parental leadership in the home.” “We cannot overstate the importance of parenthood and the family,” he said. “The basis of the government of God is the eternal family.” He affirmed “that the gospel plan originated in the council of an eternal family, it is implemented through our earthly families, and it has its destiny in our eternal families.” These principles were reflected in his family teachings, priorities, and practices.¹⁷

Be Flexible

Good leaders must set and enforce rules. But they also learn how to be flexible, depending on circumstances. President Oaks’s biography notes an example:

At a leadership conference in Washington state, Elder Oaks encouraged leaders “to use the proper full name of persons they were submitting for a sustaining vote, forgoing nicknames such as ‘Butch.’” Afterward, Elder Oaks’s son Lloyd, counselor in a local bishopric, came up and introduced his ward elders quorum president as “Butch.” “Embarrassed,” Elder Oaks recounted genially, “I asked ‘Butch’ whether that was his true name. In response, he provided his full name—which helped me understand why he went by ‘Butch.’” They had a good laugh together, and Elder Oaks resolved to be more careful in the future with his illustrations.¹⁸

Follow the Savior

The most important leadership qualities are those manifest by the Savior. As an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, President Oaks has sought to follow His example and to teach Christlike leadership qualities to others.

Love Those You Serve

In April 2014, Elder Oaks gave a powerful address on leadership at a training meeting of the General Authorities and Area Seventies. “Like the Savior, a Christlike leader will be full of love for those whom he has been called to serve,” Elder Oaks taught. “Love is the first principle of leadership. Its effect magnifies the effects of every other principle of leadership. Leaders who love those that they lead enhance the impact of their leadership and the duration of their influence.”¹⁹

Focus Others Away from Self Toward the Savior

“A Christlike leader should teach the flock that they should always look toward the Master,” Elder Oaks instructed. “One who teaches this to the flock should never obscure their view by standing in the way, such as by seeking the limelight himself or by casting a shadow of self-interest, self-promotion, or self-gratification.”²⁰

Do What the Job Requires, Even If You’re Not Comfortable

Being a Christlike leader may be uncomfortable at times. “There is a strong tendency in most of us to spend our time and fulfill our responsibilities through activities in which we feel a sense of qualification and comfort,” he related. . . . “We must resist that tendency. We should turn from that which is familiar and comfortable and work to do that which is required, spending our time and exerting our efforts to qualify ourselves for what we have been called to do. That is the way to have the spirit and power of our callings.”²¹

Be a Good Teacher

Good leaders are also good teachers. “The Savior was the supreme teacher,” Elder Oaks pointed out. One way He taught so effectively was by telling stories using easy-to-understand words. “He shared simple stories, parables, and real-life examples that made sense to those He taught. His simple language enabled Him to reach and hold hearers from every class and condition.”²²

Lead by Example

“The Savior led by example,” Elder Oaks noted in his 2014 talk. “No single principle of leadership is more powerful in its effect on followers

than a leader setting the right example, and Jesus did that. In the conclusion of His direct teachings on this continent He said, ‘Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am.’ . . . Example pervades all principles.”²³

Subordinate Your Interests to the Lord’s Work

President Oaks learned to put the Lord’s work above his own personal interests:

His leadership was not about himself; it was about representing the Lord and being personally responsible for teaching God’s word in a clear way that would not be misunderstood. To that end, he subordinated his own interests to knowing and understanding the Lord’s will.

President Eyring, his fellow counselor in the First Presidency, had watched him function since 1971, when both were called to serve as presidents of Church institutions of higher learning—President Oaks as president of Brigham Young University in Provo, and President Eyring as president of Ricks College, which later became BYU–Idaho. A respect grew between the two men, and President Eyring came to view President Oaks not simply as an intellectual giant but also as a deeply spiritual man. “He would pray very, very hard and feel that he got revelation,” President Eyring recalled of their time together in Church education. “And of all the things that I thought he ought to be struggling with” as a university president, “that was the kind of thing he did.”

Not only that, but unlike some remarkably bright people President Eyring had known, President Oaks was wide open to suggestions from others, a characteristic Brother Eyring came to admire, especially as the two served together in the Quorum of the Twelve. Elder Oaks would listen carefully to others, thoughtfully consider what they said, and change his mind if he felt their views were better than his.

Twice during their many years in the quorum together, Elder Eyring disagreed with Elder Oaks, who was his senior, and after the discussion, the quorum voted in favor of Elder Eyring’s position. Both times, he recalled, Elder Oaks approached him afterward and gently said, “Thank you very much. You helped me see it.”

“He would not remember probably,” President Eyring said in 2019 after they had been

servicing nearly two years together in the First Presidency. “It’s probably just natural to him. But to me it was just stunning because I like to win arguments. Most people do. But it was never an argument with him. It’s a different kind of thing. He didn’t have to win an argument. He’d try to find the truth.” And it wasn’t just when they were in the Twelve together. “He’s that way now,” President Eyring said.²⁴

Choose Jesus Christ First

The leadership principles that have guided President Oaks’s life could be summed up in the phrase “Choose Jesus Christ first.”

Speaking at an October 2018 general conference leadership session, President Oaks quoted an English clergyman who said, “If you have not chosen the kingdom of God first, it will in the end make no difference what you have chosen instead,” revising the saying to read, “If you have not chosen Jesus Christ first, it will in the end make no difference what you have chosen instead.” With all the other responsibilities he took on as a member of the First Presidency, President Oaks never forgot that he was an Apostle, a special witness of the name of Christ in all the world, and he repeatedly brought people back to the fundamental principle of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

With all the thorny issues that modern life threw at him and the Church, President Oaks always fell back on the Savior and His love for humanity. Over and over again, he told listeners, “In my persistent prayerful ponderings, I have never found a better, shorter answer to our many questions than a thorough knowledge and total faith in the love of our Heavenly Father and His plan of salvation for the blessing of all of His children. The central truth of that plan is the Atonement of His Only Begotten Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. If we trust in the Lord and trust in His plan, we will have the strength to resist persuasive imitations and temptations to abandon our quest for eternal life, which is the greatest of all the gifts of God (see D&C 14:7).”²⁵

I add my witness to that of President Dallin H. Oaks, this great man with whom I have had the privilege to associate for more than 35 years, and commend to you the leadership lessons of his life, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. 

NOTES

- 1 Richard E. Turley Jr., *In the Hands of the Lord: The Life of Dallin H. Oaks* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2021), 157.
- 2 Turley, *In the Hands of the Lord*, 174.
- 3 Turley, 174.
- 4 Turley, 50.
- 5 Turley, 51.
- 6 Turley, 55.
- 7 Turley, 77–80.
- 8 Turley, 86–87.
- 9 Turley, 93–94.
- 10 Turley, 118; quoting Dallin H. Oaks, “The Beginning and the End of a Lawyer,” *Clark Memorandum* (Spring 2005): 10.
- 11 Turley, 123–24; quoting Dallin H. Oaks, in “Chicago Law Professor Named BYU President,” *Church News*, May 8, 1971.
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