

Dr. Donna Lee Bowen, Convocation Address  
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A number of years ago I taught a *Book of Mormon* class. One of my students was Vivian Mushahwar, a young Palestinian engineering student of the Greek Orthodox faith. Vivian is now a well-respected professor of bio-engineering at the University of Alberta, using advanced experimental methods of electrical stimulation to help individuals with spinal cord injuries to walk again.

Vivian often appeared at my office door with questions such as how can Jews be Gentiles? One day she knocked at the door with what became my favorite question.

We were reading the first chapters of Mosiah. Vivian stated flat-out that she didn't understand what King Benjamin was talking about. What does he mean, she asked, when he says that he labored with his hands and in order to not impose taxes on his people, that he took no gold, silver or riches for himself, that he served his people with all the might, mind and strength that the Lord granted him?

I didn't understand her question. What do you mean? I asked her. What is the problem with what he says?

Vivian straightened up, then said. "What King Benjamin says cannot be true. No king would ever act that way."

Vivian was right. History tells us of few, if any, kings or presidents who chose to emulate the principles that King Benjamin set down in Mosiah chapter 2. Reading history as well as having familiarity with current events tells story after story of rulers who exploit and harm their peoples. Since I have worked in the Middle East for a few decades, I have seen conditions there worsen in country after country. The youth and their elders who supported the Arab Uprisings of 2011 reacted with fury to the years of economic ruin, human rights violations, and abandonment of the rule of law in their countries. They sought justice, but they received tyranny. The Middle East is hardly alone in suffering under wretched leaders. In past weeks, we have watched an elected Venezuelan president successfully submit legislation to solidify his

position as dictator. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad wages war against his own people rather than share power. North Korean president Kim Jung-une spends billions on his military and weapons of mass destruction to maintain a prison state. Zimbabwe president Robert Mugabe, now 93, has held the reins of power for almost four decades, shows no sign of stepping down, and is renowned for human rights abuses, mismanaging the economy, being thoroughly corrupt and suppressing political opposition.

King Benjamin was a king who mastered every task. Enemies brought war to his lands. He led his armies against the Lamanites and fought beside his warriors, holding the heavy sword of Laban aloft. He mastered the language of his forefathers, taught it to his sons, read the records and kept them for his time. His people were not always obedient and patient, nor did they always respect his positions. He spent much time helping factions reconcile their differences and resolve their arguments. In these ways, his duties were much like other rulers.

Yet, King Benjamin called his people to him and spoke eternal truths to them much as a father or grandfather speaks to his beloved children. In turn, each one obeyed, listened to his long sermon, took his words to heart and in response pleaded to take on Christ's name.

You probably know a great deal about King Benjamin and his sermon. So why on the day celebrating your attainment of a hard-won degree from BYU am I remarking on his abilities while talking about bad leaders?

With your graduation, you number among the elites of the world. It is natural at this time that you consider what will be your role as a leader of your community, workplace and home. Will you employ leadership traits that emulate King Benjamin, or choose traits that harm those under your stewardship?

I thoroughly believe that the Lord gave Joseph Smith the task of translating the Book of Mormon for our day. That leads me to ask why Mormon included King Benjamin's story and his address to his people in his edited volume. Are the book's examples of righteous leadership pertinent for our day? Are they pertinent to our lives?

Integrity is a quality in short supply in today's world, yet integrity is central to King Benjamin's message.

A colleague of mine told me of one of his dilemmas.

During dark days of the Iraq war, he managed a team charged with Middle East security analysis. Part of his job was to brief the President and the National Security Council at the White House.

My colleague said: "Imagine me coming into the Security Council with dire reports from the field and analysis that showed we were failing in our Iraq mission. I was the last in the sequence of agencies reporting. The first agency's analyst spoke, and effectively presented the President a strawberry pie. The second presented his findings and offered a chocolate cake. The third presentation was a brownie al la mode with whipped cream and cherries on top. I looked down at my report and realized that all I had to offer was a rotten fish."

What would you do in this situation? It is natural to want to please your boss, especially when he is your president, commander-in-chief and leader of the free world. Do you fudge your points; play down the failed policies and security threats to make your agency look good? Do you worry about your job tenure? Or do you report what your agency has learned? Bad news definitely, but findings that you and your agency believe are necessary for the president to consider?

What would King Benjamin do in this situation?

While I leave you to ponder that, let me phrase the problem as it plays out on a world stage.

There are many concerns that leaders face; many areas where things can go wrong even with the best intentions. How important is principled leadership in this regard?

Today our world faces major challenges, some of which mirror the run-up to the two world wars of the last century and other challenges unlike any in history. Yale historian Timothy Snyder studies dark periods of history: the emergence of nationalism in Eastern Europe, the implementation of the Nazi Holocaust, and Stalin's starvation and execution of millions of his

own citizens before, during and following the Second World War. Professor Snyder is a strong defender of democracy and in his book *On Tyranny*, he discusses the work it takes to preserve good rule. He says:

“The Founding Fathers tried to protect us from the threat they knew, the tyranny that overcame ancient democracy. Today, our political order faces new threats, not unlike the totalitarianism of the twentieth century. We are no wiser than the Europeans who saw democracy yield to fascism, Nazism, or communism. Our one advantage is that we might learn from their experience.”

Snyder points out how history teaches us how leadership may help confront tyranny, or may yield to despotic forces. I also add points as well.

1. Good leaders use history as a continual referral point for mistakes to avoid and ideals to emulate. Bad leaders want their people to forget their history so that the present leader can construct a new reality. A mythologized past has led many countries to destruction.
2. Good leaders emphasize the need for obedience to shared principles and respect for law. Bad leaders spin conspiracy theories and demonize outsiders. They pit one group – whether ethnic, different socio-economic classes, or different geographic locales against another. Rule of law falls as personal desires for power rise.
3. King Benjamin stated “neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons nor that ye should make slaves one of another, nor that ye should murder, or plunder, or steal, or commit adultery...nor any manner of wickedness.” Bad leaders care little for justice. Human rights violations proliferate as leaders fight to eliminate any challenges to their power.
4. Good leaders humble themselves before the great responsibility of leading a people. Bad leaders are proud in their own abilities. They use media to glorify their regimes. They seldom listen to others, take advice, or utilize principle to guide actions.
5. Good leaders radiate their integrity in every action. They admit mistakes, ask forgiveness, and seek to abide as closely as possible to their responsibilities. Bad leaders are corrupt and greedy. They only care to advance their own and their family’s

wealth and power and to buy the loyalty of cronies by offering material inducements. They tell bold-faced lies. They avoid honesty and substitute bravado for fact-based reasoning. They see founding principles as roadblocks rather than stars to steer by.

6. Good leaders dedicate themselves and the nation's resources to advance the well-being of all. Bad leaders care little for the vulnerable, for women's and children's well-being. My current research surveys women's position within the family worldwide. The devaluation of women's position in the family, a severe subordination of women, correlates with states that prioritize violence, corruption, and non-democratic rule. These countries are also less peaceful and less resilient.

The power of good leaders cannot be calculated. For example, think of the irreplaceable role George Washington played in the success of the American experiment. After leading the American army to victory over the British, he went home to Mount Vernon rather than seizing power and declaring himself a dictator. He was the man who would not be king. Later, he set aside his personal preferences and consented to take on the presidency of our fledgling country. As President, he realized the import of his behavior. He famously remarked, "I walk on untrodden ground. There is scarcely any part of my conduct that may not hereafter be drawn into precedent." His important action was to relinquish power and resign office after two terms, setting the precedent of rotation in office and telling his fellow citizens that no one is indispensable.

Few of you will run our country, but many of you will head families, hold ecclesiastical positions, run companies, and manage teams. What are some things a good leader might do in these positions?

One of my former students, now a Washington D.C. security specialist managing her own teams, advised me.

She said: First of all, humility is key. Be willing to admit that you are wrong. Listen sincerely and well to those you supervise. Really listen. Then be willing to change your mind.

She told the story of one of her employees who confronted her after a disappointing review. He said. "I didn't get promoted, so I have no reason to do this job well."

An old statement is that success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan. Good leaders note that the opposite philosophy is true. Give credit to the people you manage and take responsibility for failure and problems yourself.

Good leaders dive in; they lift the load first and put it down last. They care the most; they make the hard decisions.

Now as you go out to live your lives, to practice your skills, to build and to accomplish your goals, remember some things:

Remember: Most people wherever they live have strong ethical and religious values, yearn for justice, and are good people. I have learned this by living many years in the Middle East among some of the best people I have met in my lifetime but who are cursed with corrupt and ineffective governments.

Remember: you cannot expect from your leaders what you will not practice yourself.

Remember: when you serve your fellow beings, you are only in the service of your god. Imagine - we are instruments of Christ. If we fail to serve, we have failed in our relationship with Jesus Christ. As we serve as Christ would, we are serving our Lord and Savior.

Then, with a strong grounding in righteous principles, become and stay informed. Read our scriptures. Read our constitution. Read our Declaration of Independence. Pay attention to governance issues. Subject all claims to careful research and critical reasoning. Don't fall for conspiracy theories or other examples of lazy thinking. Read reputable newspapers, magazines and journals. Better yet, support them by subscribing. Stay acquainted with events overseas as well as at home. As the gospel is to be preached to all nations, we are fated to interact with bad leaders. It is vital that we know their situations as well as live our principles.

Congratulations on your achievements here at BYU.

As you leave here, you will serve and lead in numerous capacities: your nation, your home, your workplace, your ecclesiastical callings. Keep your principles intact, remember integrity is worth more than rubies, and go out and live abundantly.