

Truth & Tolerance: Excerpts from an Address by Elder Oaks, A Call to Stand Against Evil, with Analysis by Nate Richardson, 10.25.25

Based on the address Truth & Tolerance given Sept. 11 2011 at BYU, see the full address here: <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/dallin-h-oaks/truth-and-tolerance/>.

Initially, Elder Dallin H. Oaks lists 3 “absolute truths.” #1: “***First***, all persons are brothers and sisters under God, taught within their various religions to love and do good to one another.”

#2: “Living together with mutual respect for one another’s differences is a challenge in today’s world. However—and here I express a ***second*** absolute truth—this living with differences is what the gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us we must do.”

Along these lines, Oaks points out that we **should be different**, and that this will be hard. He says, “*Our Savior also taught that His followers will have **tribulation** in the world, that their numbers and dominions will be small (see 1 Nephi 14:12), and that they will be hated “because they are not of the world” (John 17:14). But that is our role. We are called to live with other children of God who do not share our faith or our values and who do not have the covenant obligations we have assumed. So it was that, at the conclusion of His ministry, Jesus prayed to the Father, “Not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil” (John 17:15). We are to be in the world, but not of the world.*”

Here comes truth #3: “*Our tolerance and respect for others and their beliefs does not cause us to abandon our commitment to the truths we understand and the covenants we have made. That is a **third** absolute truth: We **do not abandon the truth** and our covenants. We are cast as combatants in the war between truth and error. There is **no middle ground**. We must **stand up for truth**, even while we practice tolerance and respect for beliefs and ideas different from our own and for the people who hold them.*” Note that sometimes people say you shouldn’t try to vote in your views politically – but that’s what politics is – it is a reflection of the will of the majority. If you don’t express your views in political and legal ways, they will get trampled upon, truth will be squashed. Rather, we should, like Elder Oaks taught, “stand up for truth.”

Oaks continues: “*While we must practice tolerance and respect for others and their beliefs, including their constitutional freedom to explain and advocate their positions, **we are not required to respect and tolerate wrong behavior**. Our duty to truth requires us to seek relief from some behavior that is wrong.*”

Oaks says that “*a thoughtful LDS woman wrote me about her concern that “the world’s definition of ‘tolerance’ seems to be increasingly used in relation to **tolerating wicked lifestyles**.”*”

He goes on to cite President Boyd K. Packer who said, “*The word tolerance does not stand alone. It requires an object and a response to qualify it as a virtue. . . . Tolerance is **often demanded but seldom returned**. Beware of the word tolerance. It is a very **unstable** virtue.*” (Boyd K. Packer, “Be Not Afraid” (address at the Ogden Institute of Religion, 16 November 2008), 5; see also Bruce D. Porter, “Defending the Family in a Troubled World,” *Ensign*, June 2011, 12–18.)

He says *“we should **not be tolerant with ourselves. We should be ruled by the demands of truth.**”* Note that too often we think that we can never change old habits or overcome chronic obstacles; such an attitude is not in alignment with the Lord’s plan of repentance and the power of His grace. It’s true that a person can’t be expected to fix everything about themselves all at once or all at one moment, but we must never give up on the hope that every day we can make progress toward our ultimate goals of holiness.

He quotes president Thomas S. Monson who said, *“If your so-called friends urge you to do anything you know to be wrong, you be the one to make a **stand for right, even if you stand alone.**”* (Thomas S. Monson, in CR, April 2008, 66; or “Examples of Righteousness,” Ensign, May 2008, 65)

He then specifically speaks of training ones children, saying, *“Similarly, **with our children and others we have a duty to teach**—such as in our Church callings—our **duty to truth** is paramount. Of course, teaching efforts only bear fruit through the agency of others, so they must always be done with love, patience, and persuasion.”* Note that in other words, you don’t water down the soup, you give it to them like it is. And of course you do this in the nicest way possible - dramatic offenses may require dramatic responses, and minor offenses may only require minor responses. But don’t rely on the world to determine what is and isn’t a dramatic offense – rely on the Lord and His teachings to discern the serious (though hidden) nature of the spiritual battleground. A key trick of the Devil is to make big things seem like little things you shouldn’t worry about or take action against. The wise parent will see how some seemingly small things will lead to greater things, and will nip the early signs of rebellion wickedness and apostacy in the bud.

He says that we need to speak up when we detect error, particularly as it concerns us. He says, *“Profanity consistently **used in our presence** is an appropriate cause for us to **communicate the fact that this is offensive to us.**”* He says *“tolerance can be dominant where the behavior does not involve us personally.”* Note that in parenting, basically everything the child does involves us personally, so we are justified in being highly involved in helping to moderate their behavior. And we aren’t just in this to not be annoyed, we are assigned as the guardian of the children, and that in an eternal sense. So we want to be sure we are teaching them correct principles.

Oaks continues to emphasize the sacred nature of the home as he says, *“it is **one thing to ignore serious sins when they are private; it is quite another thing to be asked to sponsor or impliedly endorse them, such as by housing them in our own homes.**”* Note therefore that in the intimate realms of parenting, which take place primarily in the home, it is our foremost duty to beware of evil influences, and within our rights as parents to see to it that our household is not supporting or even being neutral about evil ideas and behaviors.

Let me clarify something which might be mistaken about judgement. Oaks teaches us the need to forestall judgement on others’ final state. He says, *“In all of this we should not presume to judge our neighbors or associates on the ultimate effect of their behaviors. That judgment is the Lord’s, not ours. Even He refrained from a final mortal judgment of the woman taken in adultery. Tolerance requires a similar refraining in our judgment of others.”* Notice in this teaching, Oaks does not say to withhold all judgement – that would be contrary to the Lords teachings to judge righteous judgement, and to not throw pearls before swine. No, what Oaks is teaching is that we don’t have the right to declare someone damned to hell (or exalted to heaven for that matter). We however can and should warn others, especially those over whom we have stewardship, most especially our children, that certain actions will lead a person in certain directions. We are the leaders, and should not fail to lift the warning voice.

Oaks cautions against legislating worship. He says, *“refrain from seeking laws or administrative action to facilitate beliefs that are distinctive to believers, such as the enforcement of acts of worship.”* Note that

naturally, we wouldn't force someone to pray. Note also that this doesn't mean we can't vote for things of social and moral importance like laws upholding the family.

He says *"believers can and must seek laws that will preserve religious freedom. Along with the ascendancy of moral relativism, the United States is experiencing a disturbing reduction in overall public esteem for religion. Once an accepted part of American life..."*

He continues, urging us to vote our conscience and to get involved. He says, *"vote our consciences on public issues, and to participate in elections and debates in the public square and in the halls of justice. In doing so we stand with angels. We must also stand shoulder to shoulder with other believers to preserve and strengthen the freedom to advocate and practice our religious beliefs"*

He makes it clear that all laws are about morality. He says, *"believers should not be deterred by the familiar charge that they are trying to legislate morality. Many areas of the law are based on Judeo-Christian morality and have been for centuries. Our civilization is based on morality and cannot exist without it."* Note that all laws are reflecting some sort of morality, some judgement of what is inherently good (and should therefore be tolerated) and what is inherently bad (and should therefore not be tolerated). If we think that our opinions don't belong in the public square, then where do they belong? Whose ideas bet to dominate the public? The anti-Christ's?

He quotes John Adams who said, *"Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."* (John Adams, from an address to officers of the militia of Massachusetts, 11 October 1798, in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1850–1856), 9:229.)

Oaks teaches that religion isn't the only basis for our laws. He says, *"even though religious beliefs are behind many criminal laws, and some family laws, such laws have a long-standing history of appropriateness in democratic societies."* Note that political opinions rooted in religious perspectives can also be justified based on rational analysis. When participating in political debates, we don't cite scripture as our reason. Perhaps in a more enlightened society someday, a zion society of saints, such arguments could be used. But for today, as Oaks, says, we live in a pluralistic society, and that makes the way we go about some things different.

Oaks calls on us to defend our positions more skillfully. He says, *"Surely Latter-day Saints do need to be more wise and skillful in explaining and pursuing our views and in exercising our influence when we have it."* Note the scripture that says be ready always to give a reason for your beliefs. 1 Peter 3:15 says, **"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:"** Note that these are good reminders for us to be more diligent in developing a working philosophical and rational framework for our views. As Brigham Young said, we should all quit wasting our time and become philosophers.

Oaks encourages us to work with other faiths, and cites the example of Thomas S. Monson who was known for *"reaching out and working with the members and leaders of other faiths in cooperative efforts on matters of common interest and in the Christian fellowship."* (See Heidi S. Swinton, *To the Rescue: The Biography of Thomas S. Monson* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), especially chapters 25 and 28 and pages 462–63.)

Oaks cites Gordon B. Hinckley who reminds us to to jab at people. Hinckley says, *"speak of principles rather than personalities."* Note that we all have flaws, and the thing of substance to do is to speak of policies, not about whether your opponent is a lazy shrew. Even lazy shrews can have good ideas sometimes. The scriptures

say that both teacher and student can be edified. Things may get a little uncomfortable at times, but overall, debating can be a good experience.

Oaks closes by reminding us that prophets are to be watchman, citing Ezekiel 3:17; 33:7 and D&C 101:45, 54. Note that Moses said we should all be prophets, and certainly any who have taken upon them priesthood covenants should endeavor so to be. May we all raise our voice, our votes, and the structure of our families, to uphold true principles and righteous ways.