

The Desires of Our Hearts

DALLIN H. OAKS

Each of us desires the ultimate blessing of exaltation in the celestial kingdom. Even when we fall short, we desire what is right. That is my subject—"The Desires of Our Hearts."

I am interested in this subject because it highlights a critical contrast between the laws of God, as revealed in the scriptures, and what I will call the laws of man, as set out in the national and state laws with which I was concerned in my thirty years in the legal profession.

Laws—Man's and God's

The laws of man are never concerned about a person's desires or thoughts in isolation. When the law inquires into a person's state of mind or intent, it only seeks to determine what consequence should be assigned to particular actions that person has taken.

In contrast, the laws of God are concerned with spiritual things. Spiritual consequences are affected by actions, but they are also affected by desires or thoughts, independent of actions. Gospel consequences flow from the desires of our hearts.

A simple example will illustrate that contrast. Suppose your neighbor has a beautiful sports car parked in his driveway. You take no

action. You just look on that car longingly, and covet it. You have sinned. You have broken one of the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:17). Eternal consequences follow.

Up to this point you have not broken any of the laws of man. However, if you take a particular action, such as jumping the ignition wires and driving away in the car, you will have committed a wrong that could be punished or redressed under the laws of man.

To determine what consequence should be assigned to your action, the law would attempt to determine your intent in taking the car. If you simply intended to borrow the car in the mistaken belief that your neighbor would consent, you might not be guilty of a crime. However, you would surely be liable for damages for the wrongful use of the car. If you intended to use the car contrary to the wishes of the owner and yet return it in a short time, you would have committed a minor crime. If you intended to take the car permanently, you would have committed a major crime. To

Dallin H. Oaks was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 8 October 1985.

choose among these various alternatives, a judge or jury would attempt to determine your state of mind.

This simple example makes the point that the laws of man will sometimes inquire into a person's state of mind in order to determine the consequences of particular actions, but the law will never punish or give effect to intent or desires standing alone. It was so in Book of Mormon times. As we read in Alma, the people of Nephi could be punished for their criminal actions, but "there was no law against a man's belief" (Alma 30:11).

It is good that this is so. The law is an imperfect instrument. It has no reliable way to look into a person's heart.

In contrast, God's law can assign consequences solely on the basis of our innermost thoughts and desires. There is no uncertainty in the administration of this law. As Ammon taught King Lamoni, God "looketh down upon all the children of men; and he knows all the thoughts and intents of the heart; for by his hand were they all created from the beginning" (Alma 18:32).

Similarly, Paul warned the Hebrews that God "is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart," and "all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him" (Hebrews 4:12–13).

In other words, God judges us not only for our acts, but also for the desires of our hearts. He has said so again and again. This is a challenging reality, but it is not surprising. Agency and accountability are eternal principles. We exercise our free agency not only by what we *do*, but also by what we *decide*, or *will*, or *desire*. Restrictions on freedom can deprive us of the power to *do*, but no one can deprive us of the power to *will* or *desire*. Accountability must therefore reach and attach consequences to the desires of our hearts.

This principle applies both in a negative way—making us guilty of sin for evil thoughts

and desires—and in a positive way—promising us blessings for righteous desires.

Sins of Desire

The best-known scriptural designation of sin on the basis of the desires of our hearts concerns sexual sin. The Savior declared:

Behold, it is written by them of old time, that thou shalt not commit adultery;

But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman, to lust after her, hath committed adultery already in his heart. [3 Nephi 12:27–28; see also Matthew 5:27–28]

The New Testament also condemns anger and unrighteous feelings—another example of sins committed solely on the basis of thoughts (see Matthew 5:22).

The Book of Mormon illustrates this same principle in its definition of priestcraft, the sin committed by those who preach the gospel to gain personal advantage rather than to further the work of the Lord:

Priestcrafts are that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world; but they seek not the welfare of Zion. [2 Nephi 26:29; see also Alma 1:16]

Priestcraft is not a sin that is committed solely on the basis of our desires because it involves acts. Those acts become sinful only when they are done with the wrong desire, to get gain or praise. The sin is in the desire, not in the act.

The same is true of those who draw near to the Lord with their lips but have removed their hearts far from him. (See Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 15:8; 2 Nephi 27:25; JS—H 1:19.) Likewise, the Psalmist condemned the people of ancient Israel because "their heart was not right with [God]" (Psalms 78:37).

When is our heart right with God? Our heart is right with God when we truly desire

what is righteous—when we desire what God desires.

Educating Our Desires

Our divinely granted willpower gives us control over our desires, but it may take many years for us to be sure that we have willed and educated them to the point that all are entirely righteous.

President Joseph F. Smith taught that the “education . . . of our desires is one of far-reaching importance to our happiness in life” (Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1939], p. 297).

How do we educate our desires? We begin, I suppose, with our feelings. The desires of our hearts are deep-seated and fundamental. But our feelings are closer to the surface and easier for us to identify and influence.

Have you ever found yourself doing something you thought was right, but doing it because you “had” to? Did you ever keep a commandment of God with an attitude of resentment or self-righteousness, or even because you expected some immediate personal benefit? I suppose most of us have had this experience. Do you remember your feelings on such occasions? Do you think such feelings will be ignored by a Father in Heaven who gave us the willpower we call agency? Don’t such feelings tell us something about the desires of our hearts?

In order to have righteous desires, we have to control our thoughts and achieve appropriate feelings. My widowed mother understood that principle. “Pray about your feelings,” she used to say. She taught her three children that we should pray to have the right kind of feelings about our experiences—positive or negative—and about the people we knew. If our feelings were right, we would be more likely to take right actions and to act for the right reasons.

Mormon teaches that if our heart is not right, even a good action is not counted for righteousness.

For behold, God hath said a man being evil cannot do that which is good; for if he offereth a gift, . . . except he shall do it with real intent it profiteth him nothing.

For behold, it is not counted unto him for righteousness.

For behold, if a man being evil giveth a gift, he doeth it grudgingly; wherefore it is counted unto him the same as if he had retained the gift; wherefore he is counted evil before God. [Moroni 7:6–8]

In other words, we must not only act, we must act for the right reasons. There are no blessings for actions taken without real intent.

Mormon even applied this principle to our prayers.

And likewise also is it counted evil unto a man, if he shall pray and not with real intent of heart; yea, and it profiteth him nothing, for God receiveth nonesuch. [Moroni 7:9]

When Joseph Smith first went to Cumorah, the angel refused to give him the plates, saying it was not yet time. During the years he had to wait before receiving the plates, the young prophet struggled with his desires. In 1832 he wrote:

I had been tempted of the adversary and sought the Plates to obtain riches and kept not the commandment that I should have an eye single to the glory of God therefore I was chastened and sought diligently to obtain the plates and obtained them not until I was twenty one years of age. [The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, comp. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984), p. 7]

The Lord saw into the heart of the young prophet, chastened him for his improper desires, gave him time to repent and mature,

and eventually forgave him and allowed him to continue his mission.

Many scriptures reveal how the thoughts of our hearts will be relevant on the day of judgment. Alma taught that when we are brought before the bar of God to be judged, our works, our words, and our thoughts will all condemn us (see Alma 12:12, 14).

Two of my favorite verses of scripture are in the Twenty-fourth Psalm:

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place?

He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart.
[Psalms 24:3–4; see also Alma 5:19]

If we refrain from evil acts, we have clean hands. If we refrain from forbidden thoughts, we have pure hearts. Those who would ascend and stand in the ultimate holy place must have both.

In the second chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul teaches to the same effect. He explains that God will “judge the secrets of men” (Romans 2:16) “according to truth” (Romans 2:2). He contrasts the position of the Gentiles who do not have the Mosaic law but by their actions “shew the work of the law written in their hearts” (Romans 2:15) with those Jews who preach the law and then do not practice it. The Apostle Paul then concludes with these profound truths:

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh:

But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.
[Romans 2:28–29]

What do these teachings about feelings and desires mean for each of us?

Are we sure to be guiltless under the law of God if we merely refrain from evil acts? What if we entertain evil thoughts and desires?

Will hateful feelings go unnoticed in the day of judgment? Will envy? Will covetousness?

Are we guiltless if we engage in business practices that are intended to deceive, even though they involve no act that is punishable by law?

Are we guiltless under the law of God just because the law of man provides no legal remedy for our victim?

Are we eligible for blessings if we seem to seek the things of God, such as by preaching or publishing the message of the gospel, but do so to obtain riches or honor rather than with an eye single to his glory?

Our answers to such questions illustrate what we might call the bad news, that we can sin without overt acts, merely by our feelings and the desires of our hearts.

There is also good news. Under the law of God, we can be rewarded for righteousness even where we are unable to perform the acts that are usually associated with such blessings.

Blessings for Righteous Desires

When someone genuinely wanted to do something for my father-in-law but was prevented by circumstances, he would say: “Thank you. I will take the good will for the deed.” Similarly, I believe that our Father in Heaven will receive the true desires of our hearts as a substitute for actions that are genuinely impossible.

Here we see another contrast between the laws of God and the laws of men. It is entirely impractical to grant a *legal* advantage on the basis of an intent not translated into action. “I intended to sign that contract” or “We intended to get married” cannot stand as the equivalent of the act required by law. If the law were to give effect to intentions in lieu of specific acts, it would open the door for too much abuse,

since the laws of man have no reliable means of determining our innermost thoughts.

In contrast, the *law of God* can reward a righteous desire because an omniscient God can discern it. As revealed through the prophet of this dispensation, God “is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (D&C 33:1). If a person refrains from a particular act because he is genuinely unable to perform it, but truly would if he could, our Heavenly Father will know this and can reward that person accordingly.

Perhaps the best scriptural illustration of this is King Benjamin’s teaching about giving:

And again, I say unto the poor . . . all you who deny the beggar, because ye have not; I would that ye say in your hearts that: I give not because I have not, but if I had I would give.

And now, if ye say this in your hearts ye remain guiltless. [Mosiah 4:24–25]

Paul described the same principle in his second letter to the Corinthians: “If there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not” (2 Corinthians 8:12).

President Harold B. Lee relied on these scriptures in another example:

*[Women] who have been denied the blessings of wifehood or motherhood in this life—who say in their heart, if I could have done, I would have done, or I would give if I had, but I cannot for I have not—the Lord will bless you as though you had done, and the world to come will compensate for those who desire in their hearts the righteous blessings that they were not able to have because of no fault of their own. [Harold B. Lee, *Ye Are the Light of the World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1974), p. 292]*

The desires of our hearts will be an important consideration in the final judgment. Alma taught that God “granteth unto men according

to their desire, whether it be unto death or unto life; . . . according to their wills, whether they be unto salvation or unto destruction. Yea, . . . he that knoweth good and evil, to him it is given according to his desires” (Alma 29:4–5).

That is a sobering teaching, but it is also a gratifying one. It means that when we have *done* all that we can, our *desires* will carry us the rest of the way. It also means that if our desires are right, we can be forgiven for the mistakes we will inevitably make as we try to carry those desires into effect. What a comfort for our feelings of inadequacy! As Alma said:

It is requisite with the justice of God that . . . if their works were good in this life, and the desires of their hearts were good, that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good. . . .

If he hath repented of his sins, and desired righteousness until the end of his days, even so he shall be rewarded unto righteousness. [Alma 41:3, 6]

Similarly, in this dispensation the Lord has revealed that he “will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts” (D&C 137:9).

I caution against two possible misunderstandings: First, we must remember that desire is a substitute only when action is truly impossible. If we attempt to use impossibility of action as a cover for our lack of true desire and therefore do not do all that we can to perform the acts that have been commanded, we may deceive ourselves, but we will not deceive the Righteous Judge.

In order to serve as a substitute for action, desire cannot be superficial, impulsive, or temporary. It must be heartfelt, through and through. To be efficacious for blessings, the desires of our hearts must be so genuine that they can be called godly.

Second, we should not assume that the desires of our hearts can serve as a substitute for an ordinance of the gospel. Consider the words of the Lord in commanding two gospel

ordinances: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). And in respect to the three degrees in the celestial glory, modern revelation states, “In order to obtain the highest, a man must enter into this order of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]” (D&C 131:2). No exception is implied in these commands or authorized elsewhere in the scriptures.

In the justice and mercy of God, these rigid commands pertaining to essential ordinances are tempered by divine authorization to perform those ordinances by proxy for those who did not have them performed in this life. Thus, a person in the spirit world who so desires is credited with participating in the ordinance just as if he or she had done so personally. In this manner, through the loving service of living proxies, departed spirits are also rewarded for the desires of their hearts.

In summary, under the law of God we are accountable for our feelings and desires as well as our acts. Evil thoughts and desires will be punished. Acts that seem to be good bring

blessings only when they are done with real and righteous intent. On the positive side, we will be blessed for the righteous desires of our hearts even though some outside circumstance has made it impossible for us to carry those desires into action.

To paraphrase Paul’s teaching in Romans 2:29, he is a true Latter-day Saint who is one inwardly, whose conversion is that of the spirit, in the heart, whose praise is not of men for outward acts, but of God, for the inward desires of the heart.

May God bless us to understand this great principle and to act upon it. It challenges us. It comforts us. It is true.

God lives. Jesus Christ is his Son. He suffered and died for our sins, that through repentance, through good works, through the righteous desires of our hearts, and through compliance with all the laws and ordinances of the gospel, we may attain to the highest degree of glory in the celestial kingdom. That is the destiny of the children of God. Of that I bear testimony as I ask the blessings of our Heavenly Father upon each of us in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.