

I Am A Saint If I Live Right

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My brothers and sisters, it is an honor to be here this evening and to participate in this special kind of fireside meeting. It is an awesome thing to be standing here looking at this vast audience and recognize that you are here to be edified and lifted up in spirit. I pray that the Lord will help me say and discuss some things with you that will be beneficial. I hope that what I say has some pertinence to the missionaries and to all of the rest of you.

It has been mentioned that my call came just a short time ago. I am one of the newest of the General Authorities, and I can assure you that I am making my share of mistakes. I am still missing meetings that I ought to be attending, and I am finding it difficult and a little painful at times fitting into my new position.

This new position that I play on the Lord's team reminds me of a selection I read a short time ago that I would like to share with you. It comes from *Sports Illustrated* (5 April 1971). Before going into college baseball coaching, Dick Schultz, the head coach at the University of Iowa, was a minor league baseball catcher. He once had a manager, so the report goes, who was given to eccentric lineup changes: that is, before each game he would change the lineup, not paying much attention to the positions the players were accustomed to. Schultz tells of a very interesting thing that happened

one night. (Perhaps you have heard this.) The manager decided to put a rookie third baseman at first base. Picture this, if you will, in your own mind. This was a position he had never played before. The inevitable happened. The left-handed batter drilled a grounder to the terrified first baseman, who grabbed the ball. Instead of stepping on the base for the out, he reflexively began to throw, quite as if he were playing third base. But halfway through the throwing motion he realized where he was and fell into a series of contortions in an effort to keep from throwing the ball away. The runner was so startled by all of this that he stopped on the baseline. The first baseman finally fired the ball back to home plate, where catcher Schultz made a very startled grab. "I didn't want the ball," he said, "so I threw it back to him." Although the runner had stopped, the first baseman still did not think to step on first. Instead, he did what any good third baseman would do. He cut him off and started a run-down play. The runner, by now as confused as anyone, fell into the act as the first baseman and Schultz began throwing the

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ball back and forth. Finally the runner made his break back to his last base, which happened to be home plate. Schultz grabbed the ball, made the tag, and the umpire bellowed, “You’re out.” Well, Schultz had only one question. He turned to the umpire and inquired rather innocently, “What would you have done if he’d been safe?”

We sometimes get into peculiar situations when we play a new position. I can assure you, however, that it is a great and tremendous privilege to be associated so intimately with the Brethren. I constantly, daily, pray for the Spirit of the Lord to bless me that I might measure up to his expectations.

Becoming Perfect

A short time after Elder Marvin Ashton was called to serve as a member of the Council of the Twelve, someone asked him, “Are you an apostle like Peter, James, and John of old?” I don’t know who the person was. I don’t know why he asked the question. I don’t know what he expected to hear. He may have been baiting Elder Ashton, or he may have been motivated by pure motive—I don’t know. But whatever the circumstance, the answer that he gave was very profound. Elder Ashton’s response was “I am if I live properly.” These words, “I am if I live properly,” have a dual meaning. In one sense Elder Ashton was testifying of his divine calling; he might well have said, “Yes, I am an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. Like Peter, James, and John, I have received a commission as a special witness, and, like the apostles of old, my assignment is to preach the gospel to the world.”

The second meaning which I read into Elder Ashton’s answer relates to the becoming process which is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this sense Elder Ashton could have said, “Yes, I have received an apostolic commission. However, I must live properly so that I might draw claim upon the apostolic

powers promised to me. If I live and serve correctly, I *can be* a modern Peter, James, or John.”

This evening in the time allotted to me, I should like to use Elder Ashton’s words as my theme and discuss with you the process of becoming, a topic that I think is most appropriate for this group, and I pray that what I say will burn into your minds at least six words—“I am if I live properly.” I also hope that this brief discussion will encourage you to accelerate your growth toward perfection.

Suppose someone were to approach you and ask, “Are you really a Latter-day Saint?” How would you answer? Would you be able to say with clear conscience, “Yes, I do belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Yes, I do live as a Latter-day Saint is expected to live.” Or would you lower your eyes a bit and say, “I am a member of the Church; however, I am not measuring up to the expectations of a Saint.” Before you do some self-introspection, let’s read the words of King Benjamin and study the definition of a saint that he provided:

For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father. [Mosiah 3:19]

Please note that King Benjamin used the words “and becometh a saint.” He also mentioned putting off the natural man and becoming as a child and yielding to the enticings of the Holy Spirit.

The other day a friend of mine visited my office and requested some help with a referral. He explained that he had obtained the name of the referral while attending a conference in the East. The person had recognized that my friend

was special and that he was different from all of the other people. This particular person had wondered why he was so clean and so happy, why he radiated such goodness. My friend, I feel, is a saint. His saintliness must have been showing because it prompted the person to want to know more about his faith and way of life.

Evaluating Your Saintliness

I invite you to seriously assess your own degree of saintliness. If your own assessment isn't too complimentary, I challenge you to renew your efforts to become a saint. Suppose someone were to approach one of you young men and ask, "Are you really a bearer of the Melchizedek Priesthood? Are you really an elder, a seventy, or even a high priest?" Could you say with full confidence that the office is yours and that the attendant power is a part of your life? Or would you be forced to admit that you were a priesthood bearer more in title than in fact? Would you be able to bear witness of the fact that the priesthood power had come to you through authorized channels and that that power had been made a part of your life?

I remember an instance which occurred a few years ago in Missouri. My wife and I were attending a seminar for mission presidents which was presided over by President Hugh B. Brown. When the conference closed, we drove to the airport to catch our return flights home. As we approached the boarding gate, a long crowd of people were lined up at the entrance way waiting for the signal to board the plane. President Brown and his escort stepped to the end of the line. However, almost as if someone had given an audible command, the crowd moved aside and invited President Brown to walk forward beyond the gate. My wife and I followed. As I walked behind, a man touched my shoulder and inquired, "Who is that man?"

I replied, "There goes an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ."

The man looked at me and then at President Brown and said, "I knew that he was someone special. I *knew* that he was someone special"

If there are any here who ponder whether the priesthood is operative in their lives, I suggest a review of section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Let me read:

That the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness.

That they may be conferred upon us, it is true; but when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man. [D&C 121: 36–37]

To me it is very clear that priesthood power is realized when one's life is governed by righteousness. God expects those who share in his holy power to cling to righteousness, to measure up, and to be noble representatives of his cause.

One more supposition. Suppose someone were to ask you, "Are you really a missionary, an ordained minister of the gospel?" Your reply to such a question once again would be determined by how you're living. Would that all of us could say with perfect confidence and boldness, "I am what I'm supposed to be because I live properly and because I am striving to become."

Knowing Spiritual Truths

May I invite you to consider the importance of three things related to this theme. Those three things are knowing and doing and being. It's my belief that a certain body of knowledge, a certain set of actions, and a certain way of living

must be mastered if we are to obtain the most in life. You'll remember that a short time before his crucifixion the Savior said, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3). The Savior also taught, "They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me" (John 16:2). Christ's prediction was fulfilled. He and his beloved associates *were* killed. Why? Because men did not know the true and living God and were unable or unwilling to acknowledge the Son. Insufficient knowledge, insufficient truth, insufficient faith have caused many to err and lose choice blessings. Many in today's world are fettered by ignorance. Many of us, I fear, suffer because our knowledge is lacking.

May I explain that certain body of knowledge which I feel is so essential in our process of becoming. One, we must know that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ. We must know that God the Father is the father of our spirits, that we are made in his image. We must know that this life is a probationary period, a time of testing, a time to prove that we are obedient to our Father's commands. We must know that God has provided a plan of salvation, a way whereby men may again live in the presence of God. We must know that man's potential destiny is to become like the Father. You have heard words by Lorenzo Snow so many times: "As man now is, our God once was. As now God is, so man may be."

You'll recall the Savior's instructions to the Nephites: "Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am" (3 Nephi 27:27). He also taught, "Therefore I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect" (3 Nephi 12:48). Without this kind of knowledge we don't set our sights high enough, we don't

strive hard enough, and we don't become what man can become.

In addition to the knowledge I have mentioned, I think it is important for us to appreciate that we are co-creators with God. This thought was beautifully expressed by a writer who said:

Man is the only creature that can consciously help to create itself. The fulfillment of the possibilities of its species may be the primary function of a seedling tree, but the tree is unaware of that fact, and it cannot deliberately cooperate. Man, alone, consciously assists in the fulfillment of his nature We are not simply creatures; we are self-creators. As Wordsworth put it, "So build we up the being that we are." Other creatures nature could largely finish; the human creature must finish himself. [Harry Emerson Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, p. 2]

Thus the process of becoming begins with knowledge—knowledge of the God who gave us life, knowledge of life's purpose, and knowledge of our unlimited potential. All of this should give us great incentive for striving and becoming. You missionaries will be going into the world for the purpose of teaching and sharing this knowledge with mankind. Hopefully, you will be able to spark an interest in the bosoms of men and cause them to repent and to live the gospel and to become as our Father would like all men to become.

Doing the Lord's Will

A key in the doing phase of becoming is found in the scriptures. In the book of Moses we read of Adam's baptism. Many of you are acquainted with that, I am sure. This is taught:

And thus he was baptized, and the Spirit of God descended upon him, and thus he was born of the Spirit, and became quickened in the inner man.

And he heard a voice out of heaven, saying: Thou art baptized with fire, and with the Holy

Ghost. This is the record of the Father, and the Son from henceforth and forever;

And thou art after the order of him who was without beginning of days or end of years, from all eternity to all eternity.

Behold thou art one in me, a son of God; and thus, may all become my sons. [Moses 6:65–68]

We also read in the book of Mosiah something that is very close to what has already been read. You will recall that King Benjamin's final address to his people had a great effect. The record tells us that, when it was finished, when the discourse was completed,

they all cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually. [Mosiah 5:2]

The record goes on to say that the people were willing to enter into a covenant with God to do his will and to be obedient to his commandments. After making this covenant, King Benjamin said:

Ye have spoken the words that I desired; and the covenant which ye have made is a righteous covenant.

And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters. [Mosiah 5:6–7]

I read these scriptures to remind us all that our becoming depends upon our doing. That doing must include full compliance with the basic principles and ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yes, we must have faith, we

must repent, we must be baptized and make a covenant with God, and we must put ourselves in a position where we can receive the Holy Ghost and keep him as a constant companion.

I think one of the greatest tributes I have ever heard given a man was that he carried on a lifetime courtship with the Holy Ghost, that member of the Godhead that has power to sanctify and purify and quicken all of us. I hope that all of us will push forward and do what's possible to make the gospel live in our lives, that we might become quickened and recognize the kind of sanctification that will make us eligible for God's presence one day.

It is important that we understand—as we aspire to certain things, as we seek to become—that we don't reach our goal in one reach. It's the reaching, it's the striving that makes all the difference. I heard Elder Ashton say on one occasion that saints are simply sinners who kept trying. He might have said that they were simply the strivers in the kingdom.

Richard L. Evans wrote:

Ofttimes our young people see someone playing a great role in life, and they think they would like to play a great role also—without any awareness of what has gone into the making of an able man. We see his performance and are thrilled with his mastery of himself and with the things with which he works, but we often forget the years of self-denial, of creative effort, and determination that have preceded achievement—years in which mediocrity or mediocre complacency has been given up to engage in an upward struggle. [This Day and Always, p. 111]

He also said to youth, "If you want to make a noble and useful man, you must begin by making a noble and useful boy. If you want to make a virtuous and lovely woman, you must begin by making a virtuous and lovely girl."

Being What You Want to Be

Thus, in the becoming process, knowledge is essential, and certain actions are essential also. But along with the knowing and the doing there has to be a being or a living phase. I love what President McKay said so many times. As he spoke to young audiences especially, he would say, "Whate'er thou art, act well thy part." As you go into Church offices in Salt Lake City down on the first level, you should stop and look at a stone placed by the staircase. It describes how these words became so important in the life of President McKay. A writer has said, "A man is what he is because of what he has been. We have to live the part we want to play. A man must begin to be what he would like to be if that's what he wants to be." That's good advice for all of us.

I heard a man say, upon learning that his neighbor had been called as a General Authority, "That doesn't surprise me. He has always lived and acted like a General Authority." What a tribute and what truth!

I love the words of David as he gave a charge to his son, Solomon:

I go the way of all the earth: be thou strong therefore, and show thyself a man;

And keep the charge of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, . . . that thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest, and whithersoever thou turnest thyself. [1 Kings 2:2-3]

The teaching is to be a man, play the part, assume the role, be the kind of person you want to be. If you do, then you will likely become what you want to become.

As I read the scriptures, I find that the Lord had little respect for a group of people, the hypocrites. He was rather harsh on this group of people who professed one thing and lived another. With all of our living and doing and

becoming, it is essential that we avoid the role of the hypocrite.

I have a feeling that it would be a type of hell if we were to stand before the judgment bar of God with the knowledge that we had disappointed our Father in heaven, or with the knowledge that we had fallen short of our foreordination. How awful it would be to know that we hadn't become what we should have become in this life. We are told and warned by many prophets to avoid the hardness of heart and the blindness of mind that damns human progress. In Alma we read:

And thus they have been called to this holy calling on account of their faith, while others would reject the Spirit of God on account of the hardness of their hearts and blindness of their minds, while, if it had not been for this they might have had as great privilege as their brethren. [Alma 13:4]

So my challenge, my plea to all of you, is to do, is to know, and is to be the kind of person that you should be. Act the role of the Latter-day Saint, be that noble bearer of the priesthood, and do all that's necessary in order to measure up to your Father in heaven's expectations. Then and only then will you be permitted to share in his blessings, to receive the inheritance that he's promised, and to enjoy that joy that will come only in his presence. "Would God," as the ancient prophet said, "that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them" (Numbers 11:29). Would to God that all of you were prophets, not only the missionary, not only the student, not only the parent, but all of us. What a mighty work could be wrought by God through us.

May I conclude with a personal experience to help illustrate this becoming process that I've been talking about. Again I emphasize the words "I am if I live properly." Some of you may have heard this experience before, but it bears repeating.

While serving as a mission president, I had the routine procedure of interviewing missionaries as they came into the mission home. I suspect most mission presidents do this.

On one occasion a young man from the East came into my office. He sat down, and I began to talk to him. We had known each other for only a few minutes. In the course of our conversation he started to weep. He bowed his head, and the tears flowed from his eyes. I had never seen tears shed so abundantly. The water just dripped on my carpet. I was tempted to measure the spot that he stained, but I didn't think that would be decent. I let him cry. After he had cried himself out, I asked, "What's the trouble?" While he was crying a lot of fears had gone through my heart and through my mind. I thought, "Oh, no, he's transgressed. This is a belated confession. I may have to send him home."

Well, he anticipated this. He sensed what I was feeling and turned to me and said, "Oh, no, President, it isn't what you're thinking. I haven't murdered or fornicated or done anything like that."

"Well, what is it?"

He said, "It's all the little things that I've done during years of growing up. It's all the foolish, little things that come together now as one. They make me feel as though I am unworthy to serve."

I put my arm around him, assured him that he wasn't the only person in the room who was imperfect, and indicated to him that there were many missionaries serving who had had to overcome problems just as he did. With this assurance I turned to the gospel. I read him some scriptures. The one which particularly influenced him is found in section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants: "For I will forgive you of your sins with this commandment—that you remain steadfast in your minds in solemnity and the spirit of prayer, in bearing testimony to all the world of those things which are communicated unto you"

(D&C 84:61). I said, "Elder, I promise you that, if you will serve properly, if you will live properly, you can go home as clean and sanctified as you would like to go."

He said, "President, I want that more than anything else. Tell me how I'm supposed to serve."

I enjoyed telling him exactly what had to be done, starting with the getting up in the morning, holding study class, and I went on and on and on.

When I was through outlining all the requisities, he turned to me, shot out his hand, and said, "I pledge that I will." And he did. The only complaint I ever received from his mission companions in the next two years was "He's working me to death. I can't stay up with him."

He concluded his mission; he left his mark on Texas. He reported to the mission home to say his final testimony. As he bore his testimony, he wept a little and then said, "You don't know this, but my father is a patriarch. My father is one of the greatest men that ever lived. He is also one of the most demonstrative people you'll ever find—he kisses everybody. It isn't unusual in my family for my father to come up to me or to someone else, to put his arms around us, and to kiss us and tell us that he loves us. Before my mission I didn't enjoy his embraces nor his kisses. Whenever my father came near and tried to pull me toward him, I wanted to shrink away. I know why—I wasn't worthy of his presence." Then his eyes clouded and he said, "I can't wait until I get home tonight. For the first time in my life I feel worthy of my father's love." What a lesson in that! What a wonderful day it will be to all of us when—if we live properly, if we become what we should become—we can report back to our Father and he feels inclined to embrace us and say to us, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." What greater treasure, what greater reward could we have than that?

God bless you all. May you resolve here and now that you will speed up your striving, your becoming process, that you will learn all that's required, do all that you're taught, become quickened through the Holy Spirit, take to yourself the image of God, and become

the kind of son or daughter that your Father in heaven expects. That you will do this, so that through you the kingdom of God will grow and flourish upon the earth, is my humble prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.