

# Putting Off the Natural Man and Becoming Saints

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**B**rothers and sisters, it is nice to be with you. You are an amazing sight. Being here today reminds me of an experience I had a few years ago. Sister Cook and I were asked to speak in another university setting, and when my mother-in-law heard about it, she said, “Oh, aren’t you scared?”

Actually, I was a little scared, but feeling somewhat curious, I asked her, “Why should I be scared?”

She said, “Because students are so intelligent!”

That was a nice compliment for the students, but it didn’t say much for what my mother-in-law thought of me and my intelligence!

Today I realize that I am speaking to a group of very intelligent and educated people, but I am not scared, because the topic I would like to address is applicable to each of us in a very personal way. It is how we can put off the natural man or the natural woman and become Saints through Jesus Christ and His Atonement. This is something I have been working on for many years—battling with the natural man. But I am determined to never relax, retreat, or retire from the fight.

## Putting Off the Natural Man or Woman

The natural man or woman is the mortal part of us that allows the physical, the temporal, or our own desires to overrule our inherent spiritual goodness and our desires to become like

our Heavenly Parents (see Spencer W. Kimball, “Ocean Currents and Family Influences,” *Ensign*, November 1974). Of course the fight will not be won immediately. It is a daily battle for each of us, and we are dependent upon God and Jesus Christ to help us change our nature.

We are taught in the Book of Mormon:

*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]*

## Spinner

I actually had a horse who helped me appreciate the amazing process of change. When our children were young, my wife and I looked for a gentle, well-broke children’s horse. Our neighbor had such a horse, but he would sell us kind and gentle Bob only if we also bought his other horse, Stubby. The names alone describe the horses.

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Eventually we decided to purchase both horses in order to acquire Bob.

Sure enough, Bob was wonderful, and Stubby ended up being, as expected, a stubborn, strong-willed, obnoxious animal who consistently acted up and caused trouble with the other horses. Because of our limited number of horses, I usually ended up riding Stubby during our family rides. He was defiant. When I tried to turn right, Stubby fought to go left. If I wanted to gallop, he would buck or crow-hop.

I decided to do all I could to help bring about a change in Stubby's disposition. I gave him consequences for bad behavior and rewarded him for good behavior. I rode him side by side our well-behaved horses. I rode him frequently and groomed him often. Over time, after many rides—and somewhat to my surprise—Stubby began to soften. He submitted more readily to the saddle and bridle, and he was less determined to have his own way. He began allowing me to guide and control him without resistance. At times he even seemed to enjoy our time together.

As Stubby's disposition improved, he surprisingly became my horse of choice. He was energetic and had good stamina. He was not at all hesitant or fearful in challenging situations, and in a group of other horses, he led out without needing to be urged on. Over a period of ten to fifteen years, Stubby developed into an exceptional lead horse. I was very grateful that I hadn't given up on him during those earlier challenging years. In fact, Stubby made such a turnaround that we changed his name to Spinner.

When I walked to the pasture, Spinner was quick to come to me. He recognized me and seemed eager to please. He responded to the gentlest commands. I could ride him easily without a saddle or even a bit in his mouth. We spent many pleasurable hours together. He was very gentle and became a favorite horse of our grandchildren. He took care of our granddaughters, and he tolerated our grandsons. We would say, in horse lingo, that he was well broke. Spinner gave up his wild nature and aligned his will with his owner's—or his master's—will.

Spinner underwent a major change or transformation, but it took time, patience, and a lot of work. Through this process of change, Spinner's life improved immensely, and so did mine! It broke my heart when he passed away this past spring. We buried him in a place of honor, marked with a hitching post and his halter.

In a similar though much more meaningful way, we are invited to change, to submit ourselves to God, who is our Master. In the New Testament we read:

*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

*Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.*  
[James 4:7–8]

### **Submitting to God**

President Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) described some of the blessings that come to us as we draw nigh to God and align our will with His. He said:

*Men and women who turn their lives over to God will discover that He can make a lot more out of their lives than they can. He will deepen their joys, expand their vision, quicken their minds, strengthen their muscles, lift their spirits, multiply their blessings, increase their opportunities, comfort their souls, raise up friends, and pour out peace. ["First Presidency Message: Jesus Christ—Gifts and Expectations," *Ensign*, December 1988]*

Blessings do come as we submit our will to Heavenly Father, and the more fully we submit our will to Him, the richer the blessings will be. They may not be the blessings we expect, but they will always be the blessings we need.

It is possible to submit our will to God anywhere, anytime. One setting that is particularly conducive is while serving a full-time mission, when there are fewer worldly distractions. We are able to consecrate all of our time and attention to His work and to focus on what He would have us do instead of on what we may otherwise choose to do.

I recently read a letter from a missionary, Sister Wilde, who had been serving in the Houston

Texas East Mission for less than six months when Hurricane Harvey hit. In addition to their usual missionary work, she and her companion and other missionaries worked for days tearing out damaged walls, floors, and sopping-wet carpets—sometimes working from 9:00 in the morning until 7:30 at night.

Though her work is very challenging, Sister Wilde described her experience as “one of the most incredible things I have ever done in my life.” She said, “What a blessing it is to be a part of God’s work. . . . I cannot begin to express the way that my mission has changed me. . . . The Lord can do amazing things with us when we give ourselves over to Him” (Brooklyn Wilde, email to family and friends, 4 September 2017).

I have experienced similar feelings in my life. I know that the joy Sister Wilde experienced is real—and available to each of us—as we submit our will and align ourselves with God.

In order to experience this joy, we must learn to follow the enticings of the Spirit—the things of God—rather than the enticings of the adversary—the things of the natural man. Because of the Father’s gift to us of agency, we choose daily which enticings to follow. In Matthew we read:

*No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.* [Matthew 6:24]

As my Grandma Jenny, who was a true cowgirl, used to say, “You can’t ride two horses at the same time” (Jenny Afton Skeen Cook [1906–91]).

### **Enticements of the Adversary**

The adversary entices us to be lazy, complacent, discouraged, indifferent, and doubting. Other of his enticements include giving in to appetites of the flesh, such as pornography, breaking the Word of Wisdom, not living the law of chastity, or engaging in other immoral practices. If we are wise, we ignore and shun those enticements. We exercise self-control and develop the capacity to avoid them. If we are injured by them, or if we

become ensnared by them, we escape through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His Atonement. Though some things may take time to overcome, nothing is impossible—including repudiation of sin, repentance, forgiveness, and healing.

Another enticement of the adversary that can keep us from submitting fully to the will of our Father in Heaven is pride. President Ezra Taft Benson described pride as “the great stumbling block” (“Beware of Pride,” *Ensign*, May 1989).

One sign of pride is pushing back or turning away from God or from others who invite us to do God’s will. Invitations may come from parents, friends, teachers, Church leaders, the scriptures, and sometimes the Spirit. They may be invitations to stop doing things we shouldn’t be doing, or they may be invitations to do something that God would have us do.

A resistant and prideful condition is described well in the Book of Mormon:

*Behold, they do not desire that the Lord their God, who hath created them, should rule and reign over them; notwithstanding his great goodness and his mercy towards them, they do set at naught his counsels, and they will not that he should be their guide.* [Helaman 12:6]

In other words, pride says, “Don’t tell me what to do. Don’t try to control my life.”

When we rebel or turn our backs toward God, we are actually turning our backs on true joy and happiness. Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) said, “Only by aligning our wills with God’s is full happiness to be found” (“Swallowed Up in the Will of the Father,” *Ensign*, November 1995). Elder Maxwell also taught that we may mistakenly think that by letting our will be swallowed up in the will of God we lose our individuality. But the Savior is asking us only to lose our old self in order to find our new self. It is not a question of losing our identity but of finding our “true identity” (“Swallowed Up in the Will of the Father”). Using a cowboy’s words, I would say that God asks us to give up a penny in order to receive a

dollar, and a dollar has some obvious advantages over a penny!

Pride, that sinister, grievous, subtle, disrupting, insidious, menacing, and rotten attribute of the natural man, constantly pulls us to focus on ourselves, our looks, our talents, our desires, our goals, our passions—on me, me, me. We look inward rather than outward toward others or up to God. Pride focuses on what *I* want instead of on what others want or on what God wants.

The antidote for pride is humility. It is humbling ourselves and putting God’s will above our own, seeking what He wants instead of what we want and aligning our will with His. One challenging aspect of replacing pride with humility is recognizing pride for what it is. As President Benson described, we often sin in ignorance (see “Beware of Pride”).

I find that when I lose the Spirit or feel distant from God or from others, pride is often at the root of the problem. I have found it helpful to ask myself, “Is it my pride that is causing this conflict?” When there is tension in a relationship, I ask, “Is it pride?” When I am not getting along with my leader, “Is it pride?” When I am not getting along with those whom I am called to lead, “Is it pride?” When I shrink from correction, “Is it pride?” I find that inevitably when I ask myself the question “Is it pride?” the Spirit whispers, “Yes, it is!”

I am grateful for the Lord’s mercy and kindness in helping us overcome our weaknesses. It is not easy to ask the question “Is it pride?” or to accept the answer. But recognizing pride seems to be the first step toward overcoming it. We can then identify what we need to work on, humble ourselves, plead for forgiveness, let our pride go, and align our will with God’s.

### **Enticements of the Holy Spirit**

Yes, the enticings of the adversary are real, but the enticings of the Holy Spirit are also very real—and powerful! As we are obedient and yield to the enticings of the Spirit to pray, study the scriptures, and serve others, we begin to see who we really are—from God’s perspective and not just from our own. We feel God’s pure love for us and recognize

our infinite worth. We can feel comforted, valued, and lifted. And often the enticings of the Spirit and our feelings of God’s love will prompt us to repent and change and become better.

### **Seeing Ourselves Through God’s Eyes**

I had an experience as a young man in which I felt a distinct “enticement” to change. This experience helped me understand the difference between who I thought I was and who I really am in God’s eyes.

During a temple recommend interview prior to my mission, the bishop asked, “Are you honest in your dealings with your fellowman?”

I paused for a moment, evaluated my honesty from my point of view, and thoughtfully responded, “Yes.”

I went to the temple and then to Germany to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with others. As I studied the scriptures, taught the gospel, and served God, the influence of the Holy Ghost increased in my life. My thoughts and attitudes began to change. I had an increased understanding of God’s expectations of me. As *Preach My Gospel* describes, I began “forming a fresh view of God, [myself], and the world” (PMG, 2004, 62).

One evening my companion and I were teaching a lesson on honesty, and an experience came to my mind that had occurred before my mission. As a sixteen-year-old, I had fixed up an old ’46 Chevy truck to drive to school and work, but it was an ongoing challenge to keep it running.

One day, when a friend and I were driving along a country road, we noticed a truck similar to mine discarded in a field next to some old equipment. The old truck was partially dismantled and rusting away, but it had a part that was missing on my truck. Since the truck in the field appeared to be abandoned, I rationalized that surely no one would miss the part. My friend encouraged me, and we removed the part from the abandoned truck and put it on my truck. I justified my action by reasoning that the owner didn’t really need the part and I did.

In the mission field, I was teaching investigators that stealing is taking something that does

not belong to you. My experience of taking that once-insignificant rusty truck part was brought forcefully back to my memory. Suddenly I was pained by my having taken the part. I knew it was wrong. The Spirit helped me understand that from God's point of view, I had not been honest. I began repenting and asking God for forgiveness. I realized that to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ, to teach gospel principles, and to testify with power, I must be living those principles. From a cowboy's perspective, I knew I had to have both feet in the stirrups.

This incident was on my mind for the remaining eighteen months of my mission. When I returned home, it was a great relief to find the owner of that old truck, reimburse him for what I had taken, and complete my repentance. At last I felt clean, and I was filled with joy and peace.

I learned a valuable lesson from that experience. There is only one way to assess our honesty, or any other aspect of our conduct, and that is from God's point of view—not our view, our friends' view, or the views of people in our community, including the online community.

### Understanding Our True Worth

Heavenly Father will help us identify areas in which we need to repent and improve. He can also help us recognize and comprehend our true worth. Rather than gauging our value by comparing ourselves to others or by our perception of how other people view us, we can look to Him. This may take focused effort, particularly in the media-rich environment in which we live.

There is public scrutiny with each photo that is posted, each comment that is made, and every "like" that is given. Each of us is affected by the posts and comments of others, whether they are positive or negative. "The great and spacious building [which] was the pride of the world" seems to no longer be confined to a building (1 Nephi 11:36). The pride of the world today has no walls. It has infiltrated cyberspace.

I suggest that it is more important than ever to look to God and let Him communicate to us our worth and the value of our contributions,

rather than looking to others. We can let Him influence our decisions—what we wear, where we go, whom we go with, and what we do. His "likes" will be accurate, consistent, and much more merciful than the "likes" we may or may not receive from the rest of the world. In His eyes and in truth, we are of infinite worth. In fact, God sacrificed His perfect, holy, and Only Begotten Son in order that our souls might be saved and that we might return to Him. Let God be the audience that we look to please, not those in the great and shapeless black hole of cyberspace. Let us pray to Him and check for His inspiring messages. Let us look to Him, our Creator and our Eternal Father, in all things.

### The Gospel of Jesus Christ

The path of repenting and changing is a path that each of us can follow, no matter our situation. It is a joyful path, full of blessings. It is a path that we walk with the Savior, and as we do, we come to better understand His great power, mercy, and love. We better comprehend who He is and therefore who we are and who we have the potential to become. The path of repentance is the path that leads to becoming a Saint.

The first step along the path is to exercise faith in God and pray to Him with real intent, sharing our heartfelt feelings. We may feel a desire to repent of our sins, to be cleansed and healed. We may also be filled with resolve and strength to change and progress. The Spirit will guide us, and Jesus Christ will help us along the path.

It took approximately fifteen years for Spinner's nature to change significantly. Because horses live an average of only twenty-five to thirty years, it actually took him about fifty human years to change. I hope it doesn't take me that long to transform some of the things I am working on. How about you?

Heavenly Father doesn't expect immediate perfection. He accepts our efforts, but He would not have us delay. He would have us come unto Him *now* and work to become "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). He wants us to be His.

Discipleship can at times be challenging, but if we have faith and cultivate the Spirit, we can cowboy up and learn to put off the natural man or woman without becoming irritated, frustrated, or discouraged. It can be a joyful process. I love the scripture in the Book of Mormon that describes this pattern of living and progressing:

*They did fast and pray oft, and did wax stronger and stronger in their humility, and firmer and firmer in the faith of Christ, unto the filling their souls with joy and consolation, yea, even to the purifying and the sanctification of their hearts, which sanctification cometh because of their yielding their hearts unto God.* [Helaman 3:35]

My message today is an invitation—an invitation for each of us to see ourselves as God sees us, to yield our hearts to Him, to align our will with

His, and to change. We can ask ourselves: “Am I stuck as a Stubby, or am I becoming a Spinner? Am I following my own course, my own agenda, and striving to please myself, or do I desire to please God? Am I attempting to satisfy the appetites of the natural man or woman, or am I striving to please my Master?”

Heavenly Father can help us answer these questions. He can also help us in our quest to improve and become more like the Savior.

I know that as we submit and yield our hearts to God, He will bless us. Jesus Christ sets the perfect example for us. His only desire is to fulfill God’s plan. God’s will is His will. God’s work is His work. They are one. Even when faced with making the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus submitted His will to His Father’s, saying, “Not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42). I bear testimony that through Jesus Christ and His Atonement, we can do all things—including putting off the natural man and becoming Saints. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.