

“Choose to Be Good”

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More than thirty years ago I stood beside the desk of Professor Richard Rosenbloom, who taught courses in manufacturing management. In those days they called the field “production.” I was a research assistant, and Professor Rosenbloom had just stood up to welcome one of his students into his office. The student, of medium height, was dressed in a dark suit and tie. He stood before the desk, bowed deeply, and handed to his professor a beautifully wrapped gift. He had completed his studies and was returning to his home in Japan.

The professor murmured thanks and then, to demonstrate his appreciation, he unwrapped the gift. It was a black fountain pen with gold trim. He sat down at his desk, took out a piece of paper, filled the pen from an ink bottle, took the pen in his hand, and began to write. The student beamed. But then he looked stunned, as we all did—the pen was not writing. Professor Rosenbloom pressed harder. The student frowned more deeply. Nothing. Professor Rosenbloom tried swirling the pen. Still, no ink flowed. Finally, in exasperation, the student reached across the desk, grabbed the pen, shook it forcefully, and said with great feeling, “Cheap Japanese pen!”

I realize now that the chuckle Professor Rosenbloom and I repressed, out of civility, came from a perception you today would not even recognize: In those faraway times, much of what then came marked “Made in Japan” was shoddy. It often would not work and was seldom expected to last.

Oh, how the world has changed. You were nice to smile at my recounting that incident because the story seems strange in the world in which you live. The words *Made in Japan* now almost mean “made with quality.” But more than that, the entire world is chasing the goals of quality set by products from Asia.

You, and all of us, have become quality conscious. When a model of a car is recalled because of a defect, we notice it. When sales for that car decline after the defect is described in the press, we are not surprised. If we shop for a car, including an old one, we check the rankings of quality from someone like J. D. Powers and Associates. If the car isn’t in their

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top ten, we feel we are taking a chance—the price better be low.

How have we come to expect and demand such quality? Well, some manufacturers in Japan, back there in the 1950s, made a choice. They made a choice for quality. They worked at it. They learned how to achieve it, much of it from Americans who found no one would listen in their own country. And now we are all trying to learn about quality because we must. Listen to this prediction from a leading business publication:

*As trade barriers come down, worldwide competition will turn white-hot. Only companies with the finest quality will thrive—and not because of quality alone. Two by-products of making or doing things better are almost always lower costs and higher productivity. [“The Quality Imperative: Overview,” *Business Week*, 25 October 1991, p. 10]*

Did you catch that mention of a by-product? Higher quality products cost less to make.

“Wait a minute,” you say. “High quality always costs more, doesn’t it?”

Some manufacturers have priced their product high and have tried to make you believe that a high price ensures quality.

But, no, we’ve learned that it usually costs less to make a product right in the first place rather than paying the cost to catch the errors later and fix them.

Now, one other thing we’ve learned is that when you make the decision to build a quality product, or give a quality service, you must make the choice early and then stick with it. Here is the way Genichi Taguchi, one of Japan’s quality masters, put it: “To improve quality, you need to look upstream in the design stage. At the customer level, it’s too late” (“A Design Master’s End Run Around Trial and Error,” *Business Week*, p. 24).

Well, a revolution is being made in the temporal world in which we live, and in which we will live. On the cover of a recent issue of

Business Week there is the word *Quality*, and then a headline, “Manufacturing: The Next Goal Is Perfection.” In that issue it is reported that “Motorola Inc., for example, may soon adopt an unheard-of goal—60 defects or less for every billion components it makes” (“Quality: Overview,” p. 8). If that happens, it will be because someone made a decision to choose to design a product so good that the chance of a defect approaches zero.

But there is a paradox—and that is my message. At the very time more and more of us are choosing quality in the products and services created and used, a strange thing is happening: More and more people are making the opposite choice for their lives. They choose to design lives for themselves that put the chance of a moral failure high, coolly accepting the expectation that sin will come with the hope that they will somehow take care of it easily, at little cost. There is even a phrase for that choice, borrowed from the world of cars: “Live in the fast lane.”

Because those choices seem to be made consciously and seldom out of raw emotion, they must appear to the people making them to be reasonable. A professor of mine, Ray Bauer, years ago corrected me when I put the label of “irrational” on someone’s behavior. He said: “Hal, you’ll understand people better if you assume that people’s behavior is rational, at least from their point of view. Try to see what they see.”

Well, then, if people are choosing to make sin—moral defects—highly likely, they must see the world in a way that makes that choice reasonable. Why would people choose to put themselves in the places, listen to the sounds, see the sights, be with the people, entertain the thoughts, and do the things that will require them to face the effects of sin?

First, they might believe that there is no God, and therefore no moral law, and thus no sin. A second possibility is that they believe we are so good by nature, and God so kind,

that whatever we do is right. You remember King Lamoni, the missionary contact of Ammon from the Book of Mormon? He believed that—at least he believed it at first. In Alma 18:5 we read:

Now this was the tradition of Lamoni, which he had received from his father, that there was a Great Spirit. Notwithstanding they believed in a Great Spirit, they supposed that whatsoever they did was right.

But Lamoni, even with all that tradition, could feel the Spirit of Christ. You remember the next phrase: “Nevertheless, Lamoni began to fear exceedingly, with fear lest he had done wrong in slaying his servants.”

A third reason to risk sin would be to believe that the Atonement makes correcting the effects of sin, even of the most terrible kind, a simple matter. There seem to be more and more people who act as if they believe that. They believe the “eat, drink, and be merry” promise. They must think easy forgiveness can come from their bishop, now, in the same way the deceivers described in 2 Nephi said it would come from God in the next life. Here is the lie, which the Book of Mormon prophesied would be said by many. I feel it is being believed by many.

And there shall also be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify in committing a little sin; yea, lie a little, take the advantage of one because of his words, dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this; and do all these things, for tomorrow we die; and if it so be that we are guilty, God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God. [2 Nephi 28:8]

My testimony is that the facts are contrary to each of those assumptions. First, there is a God. I testify to you that the Prophet Joseph Smith was accurately describing God and sin

with these words in D&C 76:22–26. I pray that when you hear them you will know that they are true:

And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!

For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father—

That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God.

And this we saw also, and bear record, that an angel of God who was in authority in the presence of God, who rebelled against the Only Begotten Son whom the Father loved and who was in the bosom of the Father, was thrust down from the presence of God and the Son,

And was called Perdition, for the heavens wept over him—he was Lucifer, a son of the morning.

And then, these chilling words in verse 29:

Wherefore, he maketh war with the saints of God, and encompasseth them round about.

I further testify that even God, with all his power and with all his love, cannot take you and me home to live again with him, unclean. And you, and I, and all of our Father’s children will someday know that being with God is being home. And that everywhere else, however beautiful it may be, will be a place where you long for home. Here is a description of the terrible fact that our Father in Heaven cannot let us be with him again without our being washed clean:

Wherefore, if they should die in their wickedness they must be cast off also, as to the things which are spiritual, which are pertaining to righteousness; wherefore, they must be brought to stand before God, to be judged of their works; and if their works have been filthiness they must needs be filthy; and

if they be filthy it must needs be that they cannot dwell in the kingdom of God; if so, the kingdom of God must be filthy also.

But behold, I say unto you, the kingdom of God is not filthy, and there cannot any unclean thing enter into the kingdom of God; wherefore there must needs be a place of filthiness prepared for that which is filthy. [1 Nephi 15:33–34]

This is my warning to you today. It is a bad estimate of your personal costs to believe that a choice to commit sin is made so free by the power of the Atonement that we can have painless forgiveness. Listen to these words from President Spencer W. Kimball:

To every forgiveness there is a condition. The plaster must be as wide as the sore. The fasting, the prayers, the humility must be equal to or greater than the sin. There must be a broken heart and a contrite spirit. There must be “sackcloth and ashes.” There must be tears and genuine change of heart. There must be conviction of the sin, abandonment of the evil, confession of the error to properly constituted authorities of the Lord. There must be restitution and a confirmed, determined change of pace, direction and destination. Conditions must be controlled and companionship corrected or changed. There must be a washing of robes to get them white and there must be a new consecration and devotion to the living of all of the laws of God. In short, there must be an overcoming of self, of sin, and of the world. [The Miracle of Forgiveness (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), p. 353]

That is not a description of an easy fix justifying a purposely flawed life. That is not a description of a “few stripes.” How much better to choose to be good, early, a long way upstream from the terrible effects of sin.

Those who are now in serious sin will, upon hearing that description of the effort repentance requires, have a thought delivered to their minds something like this: “Well, if it is that difficult to repent, I might as well go on

in sin. Later, when I need forgiveness, I’ll just go through that once.”

That is so unwise. Let me tell you why. First, you may run out of time. And second, you will find *more* misery in more sin, not the happiness you hope for, but can’t find. Remember the warning from Helaman 13:38:

But behold, your days of probation are past; ye have procrastinated the day of your salvation until it is everlastingly too late, and your destruction is made sure; yea, for ye have sought all the days of your lives for that which ye could not obtain; and ye have sought for happiness in doing iniquity, which thing is contrary to the nature of that righteousness which is in our great and Eternal Head.

Now those of you who have avoided serious sin may be thinking, “None of this applies to me.” But it does. The choice to be good is the same and is as necessary for us all. The choice to be good, which is what repentance includes, must be made by all of us. It is more difficult and more urgent for those in serious sin, but these words apply to us all:

And the days of the children of men were prolonged, according to the will of God, that they might repent while in the flesh; wherefore, their state became a state of probation, and their time was lengthened, according to the commandments which the Lord God gave unto the children of men. For he gave commandment that all men must repent; for he showed unto all men that they were lost, because of the transgression of their parents. [2 Nephi 2:21]

I know I don’t need to persuade you to choose to be good. The fact that we are here together is pretty fair evidence that we all want to make a lasting choice to be good. But the fact is that most of us have made that choice more than once. We’re a little like some of the companies who have made a commitment, a serious choice, to pursue quality. Somehow, after a vigorous start, the effort peters out.

Since I've had that experience, too, of fading resolutions to be good, I've thought some about why it happens. The problem is this: We all need a standard, something to compare our behavior with, to help us decide what a practical goal of goodness is. And most of us choose people to compare ourselves with. I learned long ago that it matters who you choose for that comparison. Let me tell you how I learned.

Years ago, before adolescence hit me, I read a book called *Gospel Ideals*. It was a collection of excerpts from the talks of President David O. McKay. One chapter described how you would know when you were in love and, therefore, how you should view and treat women. His lofty words more than touched my heart: I felt a confirmation that they were true. Without telling anyone, I took David O. McKay's words as one of my standards of goodness. Five or six years later, I was playing basketball with a very fine team in a league in a city. Our team was composed of returned missionaries, plus me, the kid. Up to that point, I had never had a date. And I had no sisters, so what I thought I knew about girls and how to treat them came mostly from the visions I got from *Gospel Ideals*. I remember riding home one night from a game with those returned missionaries. I sat in the back seat of the car. They talked about girls. I can still remember a moment, even where the car was, on which street, with the street lights flashing into the car as we passed under them. I can remember, as I listened to them, the thought coming into my mind: "I have been wrong. Those ideals about girls and how you should feel about them, how you should treat them, they are unrealistic."

Luckily, in a few years I learned that they were wrong and President McKay was right. Or perhaps, in fairness to those young men, I learned that what I *thought* they had said, what I thought they had felt, what I thought they actually did, were not the true standard of goodness. But, you see, that's the problem with using people as the standard or your

guide—they may be wrong, and you may be unable to discern what they really think and what they really do.

That is particularly true about the best of people. You see, the Lord said, "Do not your alms before men" (Matthew 6:1). And the best people don't. They do good very privately. Now and then I get a glimpse, always by accident, of the way some people live the simple commandments of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They don't know more than I know; they just do more of the simple things you and I have already been taught as children in a Primary class. I discover acts of kindness, of forgiveness, or of moral endurance beyond what I had thought we could do. And when those invisible lives become visible to me for a moment, a fear runs through me and with it the thought: "Maybe what I thought was good enough, when I get to the other side, won't be. Maybe some humble people—maybe lots of them—are living better than I thought I could." That underlines for me again the risk in taking my standards from other people.

But in this struggle to use people as our guide to what is good enough, I've found this clue. The best guides, the safest source of standards, have always been the people called by God to lead me. As I've told you, one of the lodestars of my life came from a book by President David O. McKay. I've noticed that the truest guides have been prophets and parents and bishops and teachers—good people called of God to help me. And while sometimes the Spirit has told me to use their lives as guides, more often it has been to set my course by their inspired words.

The reason for that, it seems to me, is that the only safe standard to guide our choice to be good is God. Those who can speak for him, under authority, are holding up the true standard of goodness. God told us that this way:

Old things are done away, and all things have become new.

Therefore I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect. [3 Nephi 12:47-48]

You might well object by saying that human examples are so much more accessible for observation. No, humans are more available but, at least in my experience, their lives are not more accessible. Our Father in Heaven and the Savior have revealed themselves in detail through prophets, heavenly visitations, and in person since man was created. There is a clearer description of the goodness of God than you will get of any mortal you can observe. And you need not be concerned with this fear: “But won’t using God as my standard overwhelm me?”

On the contrary—God asks only that we approach him humbly, as a child. He does not require that we master some difficult doctrine. A child can enter the kingdom of heaven. Remember the description of that surrender in Mosiah 3:19:

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.

That submission, that simple desire to do what he would have us do, makes available to you and me the sure guide for knowing what is good. If you want to believe in Christ, if you want to do good, the Spirit of Christ and the Holy Ghost will prompt you. Here’s the promise, from Moroni, chapter 7:

For behold, my brethren, it is given unto you to judge, that ye may know good from evil; and the way to judge is as plain, that ye may know with a

perfect knowledge, as the daylight is from the dark night.

For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God. [Moroni 7:15-16]

Two ways of applying that invitation to be guided have worked for me. One is to read the scriptures to try to feel what the Savior feels. For me, that happens most often when I read the description of the resurrected Savior among the Nephites. Here is a single verse that helps me:

And it came to pass that when they had knelt upon the ground, Jesus groaned within himself, and said: Father, I am troubled because of the wickedness of the people of the house of Israel. [3 Nephi 17:14]

Now, for me, at the right moment, I can begin to feel the pain the Savior felt for sins, yours and mine. His groan within himself came after he had paid the price for us, after the Atonement. His being troubled was not some abstract grief for our sins and those of the house of Israel. His was real pain, recently felt, as he took upon him the sins of the world. I can’t experience that, but I can sense it enough to have sorrow for what I have added to it. I can resolve to add no more. And I can feel determination that I will help offer the full blessings of the Atonement to as many as I can, because that passage helps me feel, in a small way, what taking upon him the sins of all mankind cost the Savior.

Now, for you, other scriptures will help you feel what the Savior felt. As I try to feel what he felt, I’ve tried to do another thing, both as I read and in prayer: I’ve tried to know what he would do if he had my opportunities. You might try that. If you have had trouble getting

answers to your prayers, try asking today, “What is there that you would have me do?”

That prayer will be answered if you are sincere and if you listen like a little child, with real intent to act.

I must be careful about what I promise you as you try choosing to be good. It won't be all roses. President Benson has spent a lifetime trying to be good. Every time I'm with him I feel his goodness. As nearly as I can tell, he has used the Savior as his standard about as well as anyone I know. And yet, in his advanced years, life is getting harder, not easier. If he could be here, he would surely smile and tell you he loved you, but his joy would have the edge of reality I found in his words in 1989:

*I leave you my testimony of the joy of living—of the joys of full gospel living and of going through the Refiner's fire and the sanctification process that takes place. As the Apostle Paul so well said, “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God” (Romans 8:28). [Ezra Taft Benson, “To the Elderly of the Church,” *Ensign*, November 1989, p. 8]*

A choice to be good—even with the trials that come, or perhaps because of the trials that come—will allow the Atonement to change your heart. In time and after persistence, your wants and even your needs will change. You remember that the people who believed King Benjamin's talk found such a change had come to them:

And 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]

If we stay at it long enough, perhaps for a lifetime, we will have for so long felt what the

Savior feels, wanted what he wants, and done what he would have us do, that we will, by the Atonement, have gotten a new heart filled with charity. And we will have become like him. That promise is in the seventh chapter of Moroni, too:

But charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him.

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure. Amen. [Moroni 7:47–48]

You can make the choice to be good early. You can use the Savior as your standard for goodness. And you can stay with it. President Benson gave you this assurance. And I give it to you, testifying that it is true. He said:

Attaining a righteous and virtuous life is within the capability of anyone of us if we will earnestly seek for it. If we do not have these character traits, the Lord has told us that we should “ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” (D&C 4:7.)

The Apostle Peter tells us that when we possess these traits we are not “unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:8; emphasis added.)

*To know the Savior, then, is to be like Him. God will bless us to be like His Son when we make an earnest effort. [Ezra Taft Benson, “What Manner of Men Ought We to Be?” *Ensign*, November 1983, p. 43]*

I add my testimony that God the Father lives, that we will want to be with him forever, that eternal life requires that we be clean,

without spot, and that the Atonement of Jesus Christ and the restoration of the keys to the earth through the Prophet Joseph Smith make that possible. I pray that we will choose to be good, take the Savior as our standard, and

make the earnest effort, persistently, however difficult the way, until we may someday see him and find that we have become like him. For this I pray, for all of us, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.