

# Looking Toward the Mark

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**E**lder David B. Haight once told this story:

*James Peter Fugal was an honest man! He herded sheep much of his life in the rolling hills of Idaho—both his own sheep and sheep for others.*

*On one bitterly cold winter night, he was herding sheep for another man when a blizzard set in. The sheep bunched together, as sheep do, in the corner of a fenced area, and many died. Many other sheep on surrounding ranches also died that same night because of the weather.*

*Though the death of the sheep was no fault of his, James Fugal felt responsible and spent the next several years working and saving to repay the owner for his lost sheep.*

*This was the type of deep moral honor and accountability that was fostered by scripture reading, God-fearing settlers on the early frontier. [David B. Haight, "Ethics and Honesty," *Ensign*, November 1987, 13]*

I have pondered this story many times and wondered what guided Brother Fugal in his commitment to repay the owner for the sheep that died. It appears he had no contract to compel his actions. Something greater than a contract guided Brother Fugal's behavior. He could have easily told the rancher he was sorry for the situation and left it at that. For many, that might have been good enough.

How do we measure our behavior? Is 90 percent good enough? Is 99.9 percent good enough? Being 99.9 percent right seems quite good. However, did you know that accuracy of 99.9 percent would mean that we would still have

*1 hour of unsafe drinking water every month*  
*2 unsafe plane landings per day at O'Hare Airport in Chicago*  
*16,000 pieces of mail lost by the U.S. Postal Service every hour*  
*20,000 incorrect prescriptions every year*  
*500 incorrect operations each week*  
*50 babies dropped at birth every day*  
*22,000 checks deducted from the wrong bank account each hour*  
*32,000 missed heartbeats per person each year*  
[Gloria Diaz, "Quality Counts," Arizona Department of Economic Security, *The DEScriber* 9 (February 2002): 12]

Is 99.9 percent good enough? Based on these statistics, would you be satisfied? What should

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we be seeking for? How much allowance for error are we willing to accept?

We know that “the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance” (D&C 1:31). In living our lives we have daily opportunities to make choices that lead us to be more like Christ, or lead us away from Him. In our attitude and choices, how much sin, or error, should we accept? How much do we accept? Can we do better?

I teach in the Manufacturing Engineering Technology Program. One thing we teach students is how excellent products are produced. This means that the products perform their function very well and last a long time. More important, it means that each particular product—every single one—is made the same way. That is the way the customer wants them, and it is the right thing to do. There are a couple of important principles in accomplishing this. One principle of making high-quality products—called the Taguchi loss function—also applies to the standards by which we live. Today I will call it looking toward the mark.

A few years ago a large American computer company decided to have some parts manufactured by a Japanese supplier as a trial project. The American company told the Japanese firm it would accept up to 2 percent defective products in the 10,000-piece order. Later, the shipment arrived with 100 percent of the order without defects. In a separate box was a note: “Sorry, we do not understand American company production practices. However, this box contains the 2 percent defective product you wanted. Sorry for the delay in producing, but these parts had to be made separately, which required changing our process in order to make the bad product. Hope this pleases you.”

When we design a part we always determine a target dimension that is the desired value at which the part should be produced. Making the part to that value results in the “perfect” product. Because every process has variation and it is difficult to produce exactly

to the target value each time, every part also comes with tolerance limits. These limits are the amount of deviation from the target we can tolerate and still expect the part to function at least reasonably well. If there is more deviation from target than the tolerance limit allows, the part will be rejected. However—and this point is critical—as soon as the part deviates from target, it is in error, and the farther a part deviates from the target, even if it is within the tolerance limit, the worse it performs.

Some companies are concerned only with producing products within the tolerance limits, but wise companies constantly seek to produce on target. The differences between these companies in focus and attitude are quite significant, as are the results. The difference comes not because of the distance, which is often only a couple thousandths of an inch. It is the difference between an average company and an excellent company. For a company to move from the tolerance mind-set to the target mind-set requires an entirely different way of looking at targets, processes, tolerance limits, and improvement. It is a new way of thinking.

Companies that desire to produce excellent products are not satisfied at producing just within tolerance. They strive, constantly and forever, to produce at target. And they believe it is possible. Average companies, or those that are known for average or poor quality, tend to focus on the tolerance limits because they believe being just within the limits is good enough.

What does this have to do with us? In our attitudes and actions we are much the same way. Either we are focused on and striving to move toward the target or we are focused on what is “allowable” based on a tolerance limit. These tolerance limits may be rules, codes, guidelines, or even commandments. Whatever we call them, we are surrounded by them. Living within them is certainly important, but it is not sufficient.

The rating system for movies is a good example. I hasten to add that I fully understand the rating system is not perfect, and I am not suggesting that it is. But I will use it for two reasons. First, all of you are familiar with the system, and second, it is a guide that many use to judge the “goodness” of movies they watch.

If someone uses the rating system as their only guide to determine what they will watch or not watch and if their guide is simply no R-rated movies, then any G, PG, or PG-13 movie is allowable. At least two things are wrong with this idea. First, I’m confident that most of us here know that many movies that would be allowed based on the rating system would not be acceptable to the Lord. The second problem is that ratings change and, in today’s world, seldom for the better. What was at one time rated R is now rated PG-13 or PG. It is the nature of the degenerating world in which we live to allow more and more immoral and inappropriate behavior. It is sometimes defended in the name of tolerance. It is entirely possible that the rating system will get so confused with what is right and what is not that it will be of little or no use to us.

What could we use then as our guide to decide what movies we watch? Perhaps this: “If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things” (Articles of Faith 1:13). Or the prophet rule, which is: If the prophet knocked on my door and asked if he could join me for a few minutes in the activity in which I was involved—be it watching a movie or TV show, my conversation, or surfing the net—would I feel comfortable having him there? If not, should I be doing it? If I am looking toward the mark, the answer will come to me and I will respond accordingly.

Think of it this way. Imagine yourself on a line between the target value, or the mark of perfection, on one side and the tolerance limit on the other. We can ask ourselves, “Which

way am I facing?” and “What do I take as my guide?” If the tolerance limit is my guide, then my tendency is to move as close to the limit as I can and, if at all possible, try to relax those limits to make more of my behaviors allowable. However, there is an even bigger problem with facing the tolerance limit. It is that my back is to the target. I am not looking toward the mark of perfection. Also, since I am facing the limit, if the limit moves, then I move with it and, therefore, accept more defective behavior.

On the other hand, if I am facing the target, the mark of perfection, and constantly striving to reach that mark, then my back will be to the tolerance limits. If the limits move, they have no effect on me because my focus is not on the relaxing tolerance but on approaching the mark of perfection.

Another illustration of this point, important to us here at BYU, is the Honor Code and the Dress and Grooming Standards. Unfortunately, some seem to struggle with what is appropriate grooming and what is not, desiring to be as close to the tolerance limit as they can. President Samuelson talked on this earlier in the year, saying, “Things that once might have been considered slovenly or totally inappropriate are now celebrated and even modeled by those in the public eye, who often seem to revel in their capacity to shock and ‘push the envelope’ of propriety” (Cecil O. Samuelson, “Outward Expressions of the Inner Self,” *BYU 2003–2004 Speeches* [Provo: BYU, 2004], 172). “Pushing the envelope” is an attempt to relax the tolerance limit to accept more error. If I am attempting to push the envelope of propriety, my back is to the target and I am moving away from it.

How can we know what the mark for good grooming is so we can focus on it rather than the limits? We could ask ourselves, “Am I striving to have the image of God or the image of the world in my countenance?” (see Alma 5:14). Also, we are not without patterns to which we can look for guidance. The patterns

of appropriate dress and behavior are instilled in every faithful missionary. Elder M. Russell Ballard said:

*Please remember that you were released from your missions but not from the Church. You spent two years as a representative of the Lord Jesus Christ. We expect you to always look and act like one of His disciples. Look the part. Act the part. Don't follow worldly trends and fashions. . . . The rules for happiness and success after your mission are pretty much the same as they were during your mission: pray hard, work hard, and be obedient.* [M. Russell Ballard, "The Greatest Generation of Missionaries," *Ensign*, November 2002, 49]

If we have been on a mission, we know what the expectations are; if we have not, it is easy to find out what they are and follow them. We also have excellent models to look to for examples. Elder Nelson recently counseled, "In your personal grooming, follow the example of the living prophets" (Russell M. Nelson, "Personal Priesthood Responsibility," *Ensign*, November 2003, 46).

Does my grooming and dress really matter? Some say that it does not matter how you look; what matters is what's inside. However, how you look gives an indication of what's inside. It tells others and ourselves what we are focused on. For example, the title of President Samuelson's address that I cited earlier is "Outward Expressions of the Inner Self."

President Harold B. Lee said:

*Do not underestimate the important symbolic and actual effect of appearance. Persons who are well groomed and modestly dressed invite the companionship of the Spirit of our Father in Heaven and are able to exercise a wholesome influence upon those around them. Persons who are unkempt and careless about their appearance, or adopt the visual symbols of those who often oppose our ideals, expose themselves and persons around them to influences that are degrading and dissonant. Outward appear-*

*ance is often a reflection of inward tendencies.*

[Harold B. Lee, *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 220; from "Be Loyal to the Royal Within You," 11 Sept 1973, in *Speeches of the Year, 1973* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), 92]

Grooming and media, however, are not the fundamental points of this discussion. I use those examples, with which we are familiar, to emphasize that we would be greatly blessed by taking Christ as our guide and striving constantly and forever to be like Him, not spending our time flirting with tolerance limits and worldly ways. Whether it be grooming, choice of media, the Honor Code, honesty in business or personal practices, church attendance, magnifying our callings, home and visiting teaching, modesty, or anything else, those who focus on the rules and limits rather than the target are confusing what is technically allowable with what is right. They are seldom the same thing.

Where we focus has a great impact on our happiness and worthiness. It reflects on our preparation and ability to serve the Lord. It gives others, especially our Heavenly Father, an indication of our willingness to be obedient. If we are constantly and consistently focused on improving ourselves and being closer to the target, we are happier, more faithful, and better prepared to serve our Father in Heaven, whenever He calls.

We are living in a world that is a PG-13 and R-rated world. Sometimes we are tempted to compare our actions to what the rest of the world is doing, and if our actions are not as bad, then we figure we are still OK. Using the world as our benchmark is focusing on the tolerance limits, not the target. We cannot use the world as our guide. Doing so is falling into the trap described in 2 Nephi; "And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea,

Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell” (2 Nephi 28:21).

We must be very cautious about the carnal security offered by the world. When those of the world say they are “stretching the limits” or “pushing the envelope” or “living on the edge,” be assured that they are most likely trying to destroy religious values, eliminate commandments, relax laws, and violate social norms. They are focused on relaxing or removing the limits of acceptable behavior. If we are using those limits as our guide, we will go down with them. Not only must we *not* follow but we must be fixed and immovable in taking the Holy Spirit as our guide in a life patterned after Christ, who is our mark.

President Faust taught:

*Staying away from the edge is an individual responsibility. Occasionally our well-meaning young people want every detail of appropriate and inappropriate conduct to be specified, perhaps so they can feel comfortable in getting closer to the edge. They sometimes seem more concerned with what the gospel prohibits than what it gives. For instance, some young adults were surprised when they learned that it was inappropriate for mixed young single adult groups to be involved together in overnight activities. They said, ‘Why hasn’t the prophet told us?’ The Church counsel in this matter has been clear for many years. It should not have been necessary to tell these young people to avoid the appearance of evil. My strong advice is, if there is any question about your personal conduct, don’t do it. It is the responsibility of prophets to teach the word of God—not to spell out every jot and tittle of human behavior. Our moral agency requires us to know good from evil and choose the good. [James E. Faust, “Acting for Ourselves and Not Being Acted Upon,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 47]*

Looking toward the mark brings real benefits. Companies that continuously strive to make their products on target have smoother

production operations, their plants are in better order, their customers are happier, their facilities are cleaner, they are able to produce more product at less cost, and, of course, the products are of better quality.

What is the benefit for us to continuously strive to be like Christ? Striving constantly to be more like Christ means we have more order in our lives: our minds are clearer, our intellects are sharpened, we have more faith, we have a feeling of love rather than mere tolerance for others, we are more honest, our humility is stronger, we are more confident in tackling challenges, learning is more enjoyable, we are on time for classes and more attentive when there, our rooms are cleaner, we serve more faithfully in our callings, we are modest, and we are willingly obedient.

This does not mean we are perfect. We may slip on occasion, but if we are striving to be ever closer to the mark, we will slip less often than if we are simply trying to live within allowable tolerances. In addition, when we slip it won’t be as far, and the need for recovery and the way to repent will be apparent.

Even though we may not be perfect now, can we become so? Moroni 10:32 promises:

*Come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God.*

So how do we know, in terms of living our day-to-day lives, when we are looking toward the mark? We see things differently than we may have seen them before. We think differently than the world. Things we may have done before “because everyone does them” come under new scrutiny. We strive to develop “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16).



Living on target requires work and thought. We must study, search, ponder, and pray. We will look for patterns, types, and models from Christ and those who live like Him. It means not only are we always living well within the letter of the law but, knowing that “salvation doth not come by the law alone” (Mosiah 13:29), we also seek to understand and strive to live the spirit of the law. It is important for us to “study it out” by diligently searching the scriptures and constantly reviewing the words of the prophets. President Packer taught that we “learn by observation, learn by teaching, learn by experience. Most of all, we learn because we are motivated by the Spirit” (Boyd K. Packer, “The Unwritten Order of Things,” BYU devotional address, 15 October 1996).

Most important, we must always remember who the Mark is to which we should look. Elder Bruce R. McConkie testified:

*Christ is not only the Savior and Redeemer, the one by whom salvation comes, the one whose atoning sacrifice puts into operation all of the terms and conditions of his Father’s plan. He is also the Prototype, the Pattern, the Type, and the Model of salvation.* [Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 381]

President Hinckley challenged:

*This is the great day of decision for each of us. For many it is the time of beginning something that will go on for as long as you live. I plead with*

*you: don’t be a scrub! Rise to the high ground of spiritual, mental, and physical excellence. You can do it. You may not be a genius. You may be lacking in some skills. But so many of us can do better than we are now doing. We are members of this great Church whose influence is now felt over the world. We are people with a present and with a future. Don’t muff your opportunities. Be excellent.* [Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Quest for Excellence,” *Ensign*, September 1999, 4–5]

Brothers and sisters, what we choose as our guide determines the kind of life we will live and the blessings we will enjoy. Just as the companies to which I referred can produce no better product than the standard they choose to pursue, we will live a life and receive rewards consistent with the law by which we are willing to abide (D&C 88:20–40). In other words, we will receive the rewards of the god that we worship. If the god we worship is a god of this world, or a temporal god, then the rewards we receive will be only of this world and will be temporary. But if the God we worship is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; if He is the God of the eternities; if He is the God who gave His life that we might live; then we will be given the rewards of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; we will receive the rewards of eternal life and exaltation; we will obtain the blessings of the Atoning Sacrifice and all that goes with it. That Christ will be our pattern, our model, and the mark to which we look, is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.