

Our Strengths Can Become Our Downfall

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My dear brothers and sisters, I am glad to be with you this evening. I pray that my message will be helpful to you in your current circumstances and throughout your lives.

The Lord warned the first generation of Latter-day Saints to “beware concerning yourselves” (D&C 84:43). That warning provides the preamble to my message. I seek to remind each of us of the mortal susceptibilities and the devilish diversions that can unite to produce our spiritual downfall.

Lehi taught that “it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass” (2 Nephi 2:11). In the realm of spiritual progress, that opposition is provided by the temptations of Satan. We learn in modern revelation that “it must needs be that the devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves” (D&C 29:39).

President Marion G. Romney taught:

Latter-day Saints know that there is a God. With like certainty, they know that Satan lives, that he is a powerful personage of spirit, the archenemy of God, of man, and of righteousness. [“Satan—The Great Deceiver,” Ensign, June 1971, p. 35]

President Romney then described one of Satan’s methods:

Satan is a skillful imitator, and as genuine gospel truth is given the world in ever-increasing abundance, so he spreads the counterfeit coin of false doctrine. [p. 36]

Satan uses every possible device to accomplish his purpose to degrade and enslave every soul. He attempts to distort and corrupt everything created for the good of man—sometimes by diluting that which is good, sometimes by camouflaging that which is evil. We generally think of Satan attacking us at our weakest spot. President Kimball described this technique when he said, “Lucifer and his followers know the habits, weaknesses, and vulnerable spots of everyone and take advantage of them to lead us to spiritual destruction” (Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969], pp. 218–19).

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Like the fabled Achilles, who was immune to every lethal blow except to his heel, many of us have a special weakness that can be exploited to our spiritual downfall. For some that weakness may be a taste for liquor. For some it may be an unusual vulnerability to sexual temptation or a susceptibility to compulsive gambling or reckless speculation. For others it may be a craving for money or power. If we are wise, we will know our special weaknesses, our spiritual Achilles' heels, and fortify ourselves against temptations in those areas.

But our weaknesses are not the only areas where we are vulnerable. Satan can also attack us where we think we are strong—in the very areas where we are proud of our strengths. He will approach us through the greatest talents and spiritual gifts we possess. If we are not wary, Satan can cause our spiritual downfall by corrupting us through our strengths as well as by exploiting our weaknesses. I will illustrate this truth with a score of examples.

1. My first example concerns Satan's efforts to corrupt a person who has an unusual commitment to one particular doctrine or commandment of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This could be an unusual talent for family history work, an extraordinary commitment to constitutional government, a special gift in the acquisition of knowledge, or any other special talent or commitment.

In a memorable message given at the 1971 October conference, Elder Boyd K. Packer likened the fulness of the gospel to a piano keyboard. He reminded us that a person could be "attracted by a single key," such as a doctrine they want to hear "played over and over again." He explained:

Some members of the Church who should know better pick out a hobby key or two and tap them incessantly, to the irritation of those around them. They can dull their own spiritual sensitivities. They lose track that there is a fulness of the gospel, . . . [which they reject] in preference to a favorite note.

*This becomes exaggerated and distorted, leading them away into apostasy. [Boyd K. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975), p. 44]*

We could say of such persons, as the Lord said of the members of the Shaker sect in a revelation given in 1831, "Behold, I say unto you, that they desire to know the truth in part, but not all" (D&C 49:2). And so, I say, beware of a hobby key. If you tap one key to the exclusion or serious detriment of the full harmony of the gospel keyboard, Satan can use your strength to bring you down.

2. Satan will also attempt to cause our spiritual downfall through tempting us to misapply our spiritual gifts. The revelations tell us that "there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God" (D&C 46:11). All of these gifts "come from God, for the benefit of the children of God" (D&C 46:26). Most of us have seen persons whom the adversary has led astray through a corruption of their spiritual gifts. My mother shared one such example, something she had observed while she was a student at BYU many years ago. A man who lived in a community in Utah had a mighty gift of healing. People sought him out for blessings, many coming from outside his ward and stake. In time, he made almost a profession of giving blessings. As part of his travels to various communities, he came to the apartments of BYU students, asking if they wanted blessings. This man had lost sight of the revealed direction on spiritual gifts: "always remembering for what they are given" (D&C 46:8). A spiritual gift is given to benefit the children of God, not to magnify the prominence or gratify the ego of the person who receives it. The professional healer who forgot that lesson gradually lost the companionship of the Spirit and was eventually excommunicated from the Church.

3. Another strength Satan can exploit to seek our downfall is a strong desire to understand everything about every principle of the gospel.

How could that possibly work to our detriment? Experience teaches that if this desire is not disciplined, it can cause some to pursue their searchings past the fringes of orthodoxy, seeking answers to mysteries rather than a firmer understanding and a better practice of the basic principles of the gospel. Some seek answers to questions God has not chosen to answer. Others receive answers—or think they receive answers—in ways that are contrary to the order of the Church. For such searchers, Satan stands ready to mislead through sophistry or spurious revelation. Persons who hunger after a full understanding of all things must discipline their questions and their methods or they can get close to apostasy without even knowing it. It may be just as dangerous to exceed orthodoxy as it is to fall short of it. The safety and happiness we are promised lies in keeping the commandments, not in discounting them or multiplying them.

4. Closely related to this example is the person who has a strong desire to be led by the Spirit of the Lord but unwisely extends that strength to the point of desiring to be led in *all* things. A desire to be led by the Lord is a strength, but it needs to be accompanied by an understanding that our Heavenly Father leaves many decisions for our personal choices. Personal decision making is one of the sources of the growth we are meant to experience in mortality. Persons who try to shift all decision making to the Lord and plead for revelation in every choice will soon find circumstances where they pray for guidance and don't receive it. For example, this is likely to occur in those numerous circumstances where the choices are trivial or where either choice is acceptable. We should study things out in our minds, using the reasoning powers our Creator has placed within us. Then we should pray for guidance and act upon it if we receive it, and upon our best judgment if we do not. Persons who persist in seeking revelatory guidance on subjects on which the Lord has not chosen to direct us may

concoct an answer out of their own fantasy or bias, or they may even receive an answer through the medium of false revelation. Revelation from God is a sacred reality, but like other sacred things it must be cherished and used properly so that a great strength does not become a disabling weakness.

Each one of these examples of how our strengths can become our downfall could be the subject of an entire talk, but the number of illustrations I wish to give forces me to limit my comments on each of them.

5. The honors we sometimes receive from our peers are potentially a strength, but we need to remember that Satan can turn these to our detriment also. We must be careful that we do not become like the prophet Balaam. The Apostle Peter said that Balaam “loved the wages of unrighteousness” (2 Peter 2:15), which Elder McConkie interpreted as “the honors of men and the wealth of the world” (Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, vol. 3 [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973], p. 361). Honors may come, but we should beware that they not deflect our priorities and commitments away from the things of God.

6. A willingness to sacrifice all we possess in the work of the Lord is surely a strength. In fact, it is a covenant we make in sacred places. But even this strength can bring us down if we fail to confine our sacrifices to those things the Lord and his leaders have asked of us at this time. We should say with Alma, “Why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?” (Alma 29:6). Persons who consider it insufficient to pay their tithes and offerings and to work in the positions to which they have been called can easily be led astray by cultist groups and other bizarre outlets for their willingness to sacrifice.

7. Some persons have a finely developed social conscience. They respond to social injustice and suffering with great concern, commitment, and generosity. This is surely a spiritual strength, something many of us need in greater

measure. Yet persons who have this great quality need to be cautious that it not impel them to overstep other ultimate values. My social conscience should not cause me to coerce others to use their time or means to fulfill my objectives. We are not blessed for magnifying our calling with someone else's time or resources. We are commanded to *love* our neighbors, not to *manipulate* them, even for righteous purposes. In the same way, we should not feel alienated from our church or its leaders when they refrain from using the rhetoric of the social gospel or from allocating Church resources to purposes favored by others. We should remember that the Lord has given his restored Church a unique mission not given to others. We must concentrate our primary efforts on those activities that can only be accomplished with priesthood authority, such as preaching the gospel and redeeming the dead.

8. There is great strength in being highly focused on our goals. We have all seen the favorable fruits of that focus. Yet an intense focus on goals can cause a person to forget the importance of righteous *means*. When I was serving in a stake presidency, a man bragged to me about the way he had managed to preserve his goal of perfect attendance at our stake leadership meetings. He was required to report for his shift work at the time of one of our stake meetings. When the employer denied his request for permission to attend this church meeting, he told me with pride that he “called in sick” so he could come anyway. I kept an eye on that man after that. I wondered if he would steal money in order to pay his tithing. You may think that an extreme example, but it illustrates the point I wish to make. We cannot be so concerned about our goals that we overlook the necessity of using righteous methods to attain them.

9. Another illustration of a strength that can become our downfall concerns the charismatic teacher. With a trained mind and a skillful manner of presentation, a teacher can become

unusually popular and effective in teaching. But Satan will try to use that strength to corrupt the teacher by encouraging him or her to gather a following of disciples. A Church or Church education teacher or LDS university professor who gathers such a following and does this “for the sake of riches and honor” (Alma 1:16) is guilty of priestcraft.

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]

Teachers who are most popular—and therefore most effective—have a special susceptibility to this form of priestcraft. If they are not careful, their strength can become their spiritual downfall. They can become like Almon Babbitt, with whom the Lord was not well pleased because, as the revelation states,

He aspieth to establish his counsel instead of the counsel which I have ordained, even that of the Presidency of my Church; and he setteth up a golden calf for the worship of my people. [D&C 124:84]

10. The family, the most sacred institution in mortality, is a setting in which Satan is especially anxious to use strengths to bring about our downfall. My first illustration under this heading is addressed to breadwinners. The Bible says that it is a gift of God to rejoice in our labors (see Ecclesiastes 5:19). But that strength can be corrupted. Our labors, and the prosperity and recognition we achieve by them, can easily become a god we place ahead of him who said, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). Carried to excess, a love of and commitment to work can also become an excuse to neglect family and church responsibilities. Most of us could cite more than one illustration of that reality.

11. At an even more sensitive level, a man's righteous desire to act in his position as a leader in his family, if not righteously exercised, can lead him into self-righteousness, selfishness, dictatorship, and even brutality. A timely warning against this danger is the Lord's blunt instruction that it is the nature and disposition of those who have a little authority to exercise unrighteous dominion (see D&C 121:39). We must all heed the direction that priesthood authority must be exercised by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned (verse 41).

12. By the same token, a woman's righteous and appropriate desires to grow and develop and magnify her talents—desires strongly reinforced by current feminist teachings—also have their extreme manifestations, which can lead to attempts to preempt priesthood leadership, to the advocacy of ideas out of harmony with Church doctrine, or even to the abandonment of family responsibilities.

13. Another area in which strengths can become our downfall concerns finances. We are commanded to give to the poor. Could the fulfillment of that fundamental Christian obligation be carried to excess? I believe it can, and I believe I have seen examples of this. Perhaps you have also seen cases where persons fulfilled that duty to such an extent that they impoverished their own families by expending resources of property or time that were needed for family members. Perhaps this excess explains why King Benjamin, who commanded his people to impart of their substance to the poor, "feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally" (Mosiah 4:26), also cautioned them to "see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength" (verse 27). Similarly, a revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith during the time he was translating the Book of Mormon cautioned him, "Do

not run faster or labor more than you have strength and means provided to enable you to translate" (D&C 10:4).

14. Other illustrations of how our strengths can become our downfall concern the activity of learning.

A desire to know is surely a great strength. A hunger to learn is laudable, but the fruits of learning make a person particularly susceptible to the sin of pride. So do the fruits of other talents and accomplishments, such as the athletic or the artistic. It is easy for the learned and the accomplished to forget their own limitations and their total dependence upon God.

Accomplishments in higher education bring persons much recognition and real feelings of self-sufficiency. But we should remember the Book of Mormon's frequent cautions not to boast in our own strength or wisdom lest we be left to our own strength or wisdom (e.g., Alma 38:11, 39:2; Helaman 4:13, 16:15). Similarly, the prophet Jacob referred to "that cunning plan of the evil one," remarking that when persons are "learned," which means that they have knowledge, "they think they are wise" (2 Nephi 9:28), which means that they think they have the capacity for the wise application of knowledge. Persons who think they are wise in this way "hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves." In that circumstance, the prophet said, "their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish" (2 Nephi 9:28). "But to be learned is good," the word of the Lord concludes, "if they hearken unto the counsels of God" (2 Nephi 9:29).

15. Another example: An unusual degree of faith in God, a genuine spiritual gift and strength, can be distorted so as to seriously detract from scholarly pursuits. I have known persons who began their academic studies with great momentum, but as time went by did not continue to invest the time they needed in their studies because they supposed they had

developed such great faith that if they simply did their church work the Lord would bless them to achieve their academic objectives. In this way the supposed strength of their faith became the cause of their academic downfall. We might say to them as the Lord said to Oliver Cowdery when he failed in his efforts to translate:

Behold, it is because that you did not continue as you commenced. . . .

. . . You have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right. [D&C 9:5, 7–8]

Here the Lord counsels us on balance. Faith is vital, but it must be accompanied by the personal work appropriate to the task. Only then do we qualify for the blessing. The appropriate approach for students is to study as if everything depended upon them and then to pray and exercise faith as if everything depended upon the Lord.

16. A related strength that can be corrupted to the downfall of a student is a desire to excel in a church calling. I remember a graduate student who used his church service as a means of escape from the rigors of his studies. He went beyond what we call church-service time and became almost a full-time church-service worker, consistently volunteering for every extra assignment and giving help that was greatly appreciated in the various organizations and activities of the Church, but finally failing in his studies and blaming his failure on the excessive burden of his church work. His strength became his downfall.

Similarly, I remember the concerns President Harold B. Lee expressed to me when I was president of BYU. Shortly before the Provo Temple was dedicated, he told me of his concern that the accessibility of the temple

would cause some BYU students to attend the temple so often that they would neglect their studies. He urged me to work with the BYU stake presidents to make sure that the students understood that even something as sacred and important as temple service needed to be done in wisdom and order so that the students would not neglect the studies that should be the major focus of their time during their student years.

17. Leaving the list of dangers peculiar to students, I come to the subject of patriotism. Love of country is surely a strength, but carried to excess it can become the cause of spiritual downfall. There are some citizens whose patriotism (as they define it) is so intense and so all-consuming that it seems to override every other responsibility, including family and church. For example, I caution those patriots who are participating in or provisioning private armies and making private preparations for armed conflict. Their excessive zeal for one aspect of patriotism is causing them to risk spiritual downfall as they withdraw from the society of the Church and from the governance of those civil authorities to whom our article of faith makes all of us subject.

18. Another strength that can become our downfall stems from self-reliance. We are told to be self-reliant, to provide for ourselves and those dependent upon us. But success at that effort can easily escalate into materialism. This happens through carrying the virtue of “providing for our own” to the point of excess concern with accumulating the treasures of the earth. I believe this relationship identifies materialism as a peculiar Mormon weakness, a classic example of how Satan can persuade some to drive a legitimate strength to such excess that it becomes a disabling weakness.

19. A desire to follow a prophet is surely a great and appropriate strength, but even this has its potentially dangerous manifestations. I have heard of more than one group who are so intent on following the words of a dead

prophet that they have rejected the teachings and counsel of the living ones. Satan has used that corruption from the beginning of the Restoration. You will recall Joseph Smith's direction for the Saints to gather in Kirtland, Ohio, then in Missouri, and then in Illinois. At each place along the way, a certain number of Saints fell away, crying "fallen prophet" as their excuse for adhering to the earlier words and rejecting the current direction. The same thing happened after the death of the Prophet Joseph Smith, when some Saints seized upon one statement or another by the deceased prophet as a basis for sponsoring or joining a new group that rejected the counsel of the living ones.

Following the prophet is a great strength, but it needs to be consistent and current lest it lead to the spiritual downfall that comes from rejecting continuous revelation. Under that principle, the most important difference between dead prophets and living ones is that those who are dead are not here to receive and declare the Lord's latest words to his people. If they were, there would be no differences among the messages of the prophets.

A related distortion is seen in the practice of those who select a few sentences from the teachings of a prophet and use these to support their political agenda or other personal purposes. In doing so, they typically ignore the contrary implications of other prophetic words, or even the clear example of the prophet's own actions. For example, I have corresponded with several Church members who sought to use something President Benson is quoted as saying as a basis for refusing to file an income-tax return or to pay income taxes. I have tried to persuade these persons that their interpretation cannot be what President Benson intended, because both he and his predecessors in that sacred office, and all of the General Authorities, have faithfully filed their income-tax returns and paid the taxes required by law. The servants of God are under the Master's commands

to follow him and to be examples to the flock (1 Timothy 4:12; 1 Peter 5:3). We should interpret their words in the light of their walk. To wrest the words of a prophet to support a private agenda, political or financial or otherwise, is to try to *manipulate* the prophet, not to *follow* him.

20. Other strengths that can be used for our downfall are the gifts of love and tolerance. Clearly, these are great virtues. Love is an ultimate quality, and tolerance is its handmaiden. Love and tolerance are pluralistic, and that is their strength, but it is also the source of their potential weakness. Love and tolerance are incomplete unless they are accompanied by a concern for truth and a commitment to the unity God has commanded of his servants.

Carried to an undisciplined excess, love and tolerance can produce indifference to truth and justice and opposition to unity. What makes mankind "free" from death and sin is not merely love but love accompanied by truth: "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). And the test of whether we are the Lord's is not just love and tolerance, but unity. "If ye are not one," the risen Lord said, "ye are not mine" (D&C 38:27). To follow the Lord's example of love, we must remember his explanation that "whom I love I also chasten" (D&C 95:1) and also that he chastens us "that [we] might be one" (D&C 61:8).

At this point, as I draw near to my conclusion, I need to caution myself and each of my listeners that the very nature of this message could tend to the same downfall that it warns against. This idea that our strengths can become our weaknesses could be understood to imply that we should have "moderation in all things." But the Savior said that if we are lukewarm, he will spue us out of his mouth (see Revelation 3:16). Moderation in *all* things is not a virtue because it would seem to justify moderation in commitment. That is not moderation but indifference. That kind of "moderation" runs counter to the divine commands to

serve with all of our “heart, might, mind and strength” (D&C 4:2), to “seek . . . earnestly the riches of eternity” (D&C 68:31), and to be “valiant in the testimony of Jesus” (D&C 76:79). Moderation is not the answer.

How, then, do we prevent our strengths from becoming our downfall? The quality we must cultivate is humility. Humility is the great protector. Humility is the antidote against pride. Humility is the catalyst for all learning, especially spiritual things.

Through the prophet Ether, the Lord gave us this great insight into the role of humility:

I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them. [Ether 12:27]

We might also say that if men and women humble themselves before God, he will help them prevent their strengths from becoming weaknesses that the adversary can exploit to destroy them.

If we are meek and humble enough to receive counsel, the Lord can and will guide us through the counsel of our parents, our teachers, and our leaders. The proud can only hear the clamor of the crowd, but a person who

“becometh as a child”—as King Benjamin said, “submissive, meek [and] humble” (Mosiah 3:19)—can hear and follow the still small voice by which our Father in Heaven guides his children who are receptive.

A person who engages in self-congratulation over a supposed strength has lost the protection of humility and is vulnerable to Satan’s using that strength to produce his or her downfall. In contrast, if we are humble and teachable, hearkening to the commandments of God, the counsel of his leaders, and the promptings of his spirit, we can be guided. We can be guided in how to use our spiritual gifts, our accomplishments, and all of our other strengths for righteousness. And we can be guided in how to avoid Satan’s efforts to use our strengths to cause our downfall.

In all of this, we should remember and rely on the Lord’s direction and promise:

Be thou humble; and the Lord thy God shall lead thee by the hand, and give thee answer to thy prayers. [D&C 112:10]

I testify that this is true, even as I testify of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose atoning sacrifice has brought to pass the Resurrection and will bring to pass all righteousness, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.