

Becoming a Work of Art

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I am very grateful for the privilege to be with you today. It is a great opportunity to speak to a very special and unique group of people like you.

It is truly a blessing to study at this university, a place that allows each of you to live according to your beliefs. Not all students in the world have this opportunity.

When I was your age, I studied at a respected university in São Paulo, Brazil—in the city in which I was born and raised. It was a good institution of higher education, but it didn't have an environment as healthy as what you have here. It didn't have the wonderful support structure that BYU has. Furthermore, it didn't have a single other student who shared the same principles of the gospel that I had. To the contrary, I had many peers who tried to influence me in a direction that was different from where I wanted to go. So I can assure you that you are truly very blessed to have this privilege. Enjoy it.

I am certain you have already heard of Michelangelo, the Italian sculptor. Besides being a sculptor, he was a painter, a poet, and an architect, and he is considered one of the foremost artists of Western civilization during the period of the Renaissance to Mannerism. He was born in Italy in 1475, and he is known as a

genius for his large marble statues. He lived in Italy most of his life and left an artistic legacy for humanity that is admired even today.

One of his most famous sculptures is called the *Pietà*. This statue portrays the scene of Mary, the mother of Jesus, seated with Jesus Christ, her son, laying in her arms after having been taken down from the cross. Mary's countenance expresses profound sadness for the suffering that she has experienced, and the face of Jesus expresses the suffering He had accumulated after having borne the arduous burden of taking upon Him the sins of the world and being nailed to the cross. It is a work of art that depicts the authenticity of the physical and emotional details of a scene of suffering.

I had the privilege of viewing this sculpture during a visit I made to Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. I was even more impressed to learn that Michelangelo used basically two main tools to accomplish his works of art: a hammer and a chisel. It is truly incredible to imagine how someone could create such an enormous and beautiful work of art from a

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piece of raw marble using these two tools. Certainly he was very talented and knew how to use the resources he had to produce such beautiful works of art.

When I think about the works he produced and the results he achieved, I think figuratively about the wonderful plan of love our Heavenly Father developed in consideration for each of us and for what He hoped we might become when He sent us here to earth.

Each of us was born with the potential to become like our Heavenly Father. Through our experiences and by properly using our agency, we can turn our lives in the direction of God and become like Him. Or we can be distracted by the world and fail to achieve our potential as it was promised to us. Figuratively, we all have the potential to become beautiful works of art in the Lord's hands. In this sense, He is the sculptor and He uses a hammer and chisel to mold us through our experiences day by day. If we allow the Lord to shape us, the result will be wonderful.

But without question, this world offers many distractions that can pull our focus away from the primary reason we are living here on this earth. These distractions can turn into detours in our lives that prevent us from being transformed into works of art. Let us examine how this happens.

Before speaking about this process, I wish to emphasize two principles. First, you need to know that you are a chosen generation; you were preordained by the Lord to be here on the earth during this period of history. The Lord reserved you for this time because He knew that you would be part of a group of special and strong spirits who could overcome the challenges of this era. Therefore, you are a special generation. I am certain that you have already heard this many times, but can you now see why?

Second, the enemy knows your potential and the promises made to you. He was in the presence of the Lord when this plan was

presented. He knows exactly what the Lord expects for each of us. He doesn't have the veil of forgetfulness that we have while we live upon the earth. For this reason he works hard to distract our attention from our primary focus, trying to draw us away from the direction of the Lord.

Now, in talking about the process of distractions, I would like to refer to Lehi's vision about the tree of life. Remember that Lehi saw a tree "whose fruit was desirable to make one happy" (1 Nephi 8:10). He also saw a straight and narrow path alongside an iron rod that "extended along the bank of the river" and led to the field where the tree was located (1 Nephi 8:19–20). A dense mist of darkness covered the path leading to the tree of life. Because of this mist, several people who had started along the path to the tree of life wandered away from it and became lost (see 1 Nephi 8:22–23).

In 1 Nephi 12:17, Nephi explained that "the mists of darkness are the temptations of the devil, which blindeth the eyes, and hardeneth the hearts of the children of men, and leadeth them away into broad roads, that they perish and are lost." Here we find the primary distraction in our lives: temptation. The Guide to the Scriptures defines temptation as "a test of a person's ability to choose good instead of evil; an enticement to sin and follow Satan instead of God."

Temptation is the primary weapon the enemy uses to distract us. According to the teachings of Nephi, temptation makes us blind, hardens our hearts, and causes us to perish. Generally speaking, temptation is very subtle. It comes to us undetected and deceives us. We are unable to see the consequences of it, and consequently we may make wrong choices. We become blind. We become prideful with a hardened heart, unreceptive to the will of God. The only weapon we have to avoid this distraction is to hold onto the iron rod. Nephi explained this to his brothers when they asked him about the meaning of the iron rod:

And I said unto them that it was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction.

Wherefore, I, Nephi, did exhort them to give heed unto the word of the Lord; yea, I did exhort them with all the energies of my soul, and with all the faculty which I possessed, that they would give heed to the word of God and remember to keep his commandments always in all things. [1 Nephi 15:24–25]

I remember an experience that a young man went through during the years when he was in college. This young man was a good member of the Church. He told me that he was once invited to a costume party in the house of one of his classmates. Everyone was very excited to go to that particular party. The friend claimed that his college professors were also invited to attend, especially some of them who were very nice and friendly toward the students. All of this seemed very inviting and secure. So the young man accepted the invitation to go to the party. When he arrived there, he realized that the atmosphere was not exactly what he had expected. There were students drinking, smoking, using drugs, and doing other horrible things in every corner of the house. He said that he became very concerned about what was happening and began to think about how he could leave the situation.

The party was at a location far from his own home. He had gotten a ride with friends, and so he had no way to return home on his own. At that very moment he prayed silently unto the Lord, asking for help. After some pondering, he felt that he should walk outside the house. He followed his feelings and stayed outside the house until the party ended. That decision went unnoticed by his friends, who were all involved in that atmosphere and only regrouped when

it was time to leave. During the ride home his friends talked about all the horrible things that had happened during the party.

This young man felt very uncomfortable with the whole situation. It was not easy for him to bear it, but the next day he went to sacrament meeting and partook of the sacrament. In that moment he felt calm, peaceful, and certain that he had made the correct decision. In that moment he realized what it means to grasp the iron rod and not let go, even in the midst of the mists of darkness. He understood clearly what Nephi taught his brothers when he said that “whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction” (1 Nephi 15:24).

Imagine what might have happened if that young man, simply out of shame, had not been strong enough to continue holding onto the iron rod. As a result of this and other decisions in his life, that young man married a wonderful young woman in the temple, formed a special family, and went on to be very successful in his life in everything he has done. He serves faithfully in the Church and seeks to be a good example to his children.

It is not easy to face temptation daily. We are all exposed to an environment that is hostile to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We live in a world that is deteriorating morally. Media and technology invite us to participate in destructive and life-shattering activities that are opposed to our beliefs and the values of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Pressures from friends who do not share our principles, or who share our principles but are weak in their faith, push us to participate in degrading behaviors. On top of all this, we have to deal with the natural man that exists in each of us.

The Guide to the Scriptures defines the natural man as

a person who chooses to be influenced by the passions, desires, appetites, and senses of the flesh rather than by the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Such a person can comprehend physical things but not spiritual things. All people are carnal, or mortal, because of the fall of Adam and Eve. Each person must be born again through the atonement of Jesus Christ to cease being a natural man.

One year ago, Elder Paul V. Johnson, commissioner of the Church Educational System, said the following from this same pulpit:

Part of our earthly experience consists of being enticed by both good and evil and then learning how to choose good over evil. How could we become like the Savior if we did not have agency to make those choices? By using our agency to choose the right, we begin to put on the divine nature—to pattern our lives after His. We find peace, happiness, and freedom as we make right choices. . . .

. . . Satan will now deceive and blind men, and he will lead them captive at his will. If he is leading people captive, doesn't that sound like he is destroying agency? The fact is, he couldn't destroy agency in the pre-earth life, and he can't do it now either. If he can't destroy agency, then how can he lead us captive? He does it by enticing us to sin. When we sin, we subject ourselves to him. We, in effect, give part of our agency to him. He can't take it from us, but we can relinquish it.

. . . When we yield to temptation, we become subject to the will of the devil. Again, even though he can't destroy or take away our agency by force, we can give it up. ["Free to Choose Liberty or Captivity," BYU devotional address, 6 November 2012]

There is a simple formula that President Thomas S. Monson often quotes that can help us avoid the distraction of temptation and keep us moving in the right direction. Quoting the adage, he says, "You can't be right by doing wrong, and you can't be wrong by doing right" ("In Harm's Way," *Ensign*, May 1998, 48;

see also *Teachings of Thomas S. Monson*, comp. Lynne F. Cannegieter [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011], 84–85).

President Monson's formula is simple and direct. If we exercise faith and are diligent in obeying the commandments of the Lord, we will easily find the right way to go when we face daily small choices.

In that regard, President George Albert Smith liked to quote his grandfather, George A. Smith:

*There is a line of demarcation well defined between the Lord's territory and the devil's territory. If you will stay on the Lord's side of the line you will be under his influence and will have no desire to do wrong; but if you cross to the devil's side of that line one inch you are in the tempter's power and if he is successful, you will not be able to think or even reason properly because you will have lost the Spirit of the Lord. [George Albert Smith, "A Faith Founded upon Truth," *Deseret News*, 17 June 1944, Church section, 9; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: George Albert Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 191; see also CR, October 1932, 26]*

Therefore, we should always ask ourselves, "Are my actions placing me in the Lord's territory or in the enemy's territory?" Remember, "You can't be right by doing wrong, and you can't be wrong by doing right."

Let us examine what the prophet Mormon taught his people regarding this same topic:

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.

But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil; for after this manner doth the

devil work, for he persuadeth no man to do good, no, not one; neither do his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him. [Moroni 7:16–17]

Our Heavenly Father has given us the Light of Christ. The Light of Christ is the divine energy, power, or influence that proceeds from God through Christ and gives life and light to all things. It helps a person choose between right and wrong. This wonderful gift, in conjunction with the companionship of the Holy Ghost, should help us to determine whether our manner of living is placing us in the territory of the Lord or in that of the enemy. If our behavior is good, we are being inspired by God, for everything that is good comes from God. If our behavior is bad, we are being influenced by the enemy, for he persuades men to do what is wrong.

The young man from the story I told you a moment ago used these two wonderful gifts. The Light of Christ helped him to identify what was right, and the Holy Ghost guided his decision about which path he should follow. These two gifts are available to those who hold onto the iron rod.

Now let us imagine that for some reason we have been deceived or confused by temptation and we end up sinning. What should we do? If we fall into temptation and sin, we have to reconcile ourselves with God. In the language of the scriptures, this means we must repent.

Repentance is

a change of mind and heart that brings a fresh attitude toward God, oneself, and life in general. Repentance implies that a person turns away from evil and turns his heart and will to God, submitting to God's commandments and desires and forsaking sin. True repentance comes from a love for God and a sincere desire to obey his commandments. [Guide to the Scriptures]

I like very much what Elder Neil L. Andersen taught about repentance:

When we sin, we turn away from God. When we repent, we turn back toward God.

The invitation to repent is rarely a voice of chastisement but rather a loving appeal to turn around and to “re-turn” toward God [see Helaman 7:17]. It is the beckoning of a loving Father and His Only Begotten Son to be more than we are, to reach up to a higher way of life, to change, and to feel the happiness of keeping the commandments. Being disciples of Christ, we rejoice in the blessing of repenting and the joy of being forgiven. They become part of us, shaping the way we think and feel. [“Repent . . . That I May Heal You,” Ensign, November 2009, 40]

My dear young people, repentance is a wonderful gift that is available to all who desire to return to God. It is available to those who have the desire to hold onto the iron rod and allow the Lord to mold their lives into wonderful works of art. Repentance allows the Lord to use a hammer and chisel to shape our lives and make us into beautiful works of art.

We were born with the seed of divinity in our spirits because we are God’s children. This seed needs to grow. It develops as we use our agency in righteousness, as we make correct decisions, and as we use the Light of Christ and the Holy Ghost to guide us in the decisions we make during the course of our lives. In this way we shape our spirits so that they become admirable works of art.

This process takes time. Michelangelo was thirteen years old when he began his artistic activities as an apprentice in Italy. He followed his masters’ teachings, and for more than seventy years of his life he produced works of art admired around the world. Like Michelangelo, we need to understand that it is possible to shape our lives from one day to another.

Our choices shape our souls. Recognizing our dedication and perseverance, the Lord will give us what we are unable to obtain by ourselves. He will shape us with His hammer and chisel, because He sees our efforts to overcome our imperfections and human weaknesses.

In that regard, repentance becomes part of our daily lives. Our weekly taking of the sacrament is so important—to come meekly, humbly before the Lord, acknowledging our dependence upon Him, asking Him to forgive and to renew us, and promising to always remember Him.

Sometimes in our daily efforts to become more Christlike, we find ourselves repeatedly struggling with the same difficulties. It is as if we are climbing a tree-covered mountain. At times we don't see our progress until we get closer to the top and look back from the high ridges. Please don't be discouraged. If you are striving and working to repent, then you are in the process of repenting.

Elder D. Todd Christofferson stated, "Overcoming bad habits or addictions often means an effort today followed by another tomorrow and then another, perhaps for many days, even months and years, until we achieve victory" ("Recognizing God's Hand in Our Daily Blessings," *Ensign*, January 2012, 21).

As we improve, we see life more clearly and feel the Holy Ghost working more strongly within us. For those who are truly repentant but seem unable to feel relief, continue keeping

the commandments. I promise you, relief will come in the timetable of the Lord. Healing also requires time.

My invitation today is for all of us to allow the Lord to mold and transform our lives into our potential—into that which our Heavenly Father has planned for us.

Let us understand our eternal perspective and turn our lives into beautiful works of art that were planned by a loving Heavenly Father who developed a plan of redemption so that we could return to His presence.

I bear my sacred testimony that Jesus Christ is our Savior. He gave His life so that we might repent and change our character. I testify to you that, thanks to His love, it is possible to change. It is possible to leave our weaknesses behind. It is possible to reject the temptations in our lives and develop the attributes of Christ—if and only if we hold onto the iron rod. The Savior Himself shows us the way. He gave us the perfect example and commanded that each of us become as He is. His invitation to us is that we follow Him, that we imitate His example, and that we become as He is. I bear testimony of these truths in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.