

# *Being Righteous in Our Hearts*

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Good morning, brothers and sisters. It is always a joy for me to be among you on this beautiful campus. Your enthusiasm is contagious, and I come away from my visits to Brigham Young University with renewed energy and confidence in the youth of our divine Church. I bring you the greetings and love of the First Presidency and of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. As you face the challenges of a new year, please know that our thoughts and prayers are with you. We pray often that our Heavenly Father will bless you in your studies and in your efforts to be true to the covenants that you have made with him.

I add my congratulations to Coach LaVell Edwards, to his assistant coaches, and to the entire Cougar football team for that thrilling Cotton Bowl victory! The media refers to Coach Edwards as “the face of stone—heart of gold,” and under his picture reads “Profile of a Winner.” Coach Edwards, thanks to you and to all the players for a great season, and a special thanks for representing the Church and this university so well while basking in the national spotlight. You’ve given us much to be proud of and plenty to rise and shout about!

I pay tribute to your president, Merrill J. Bateman, for his great leadership in guiding the destiny of this institution. I know he is a

true servant of the Lord, and his only goal for this university is to make sure that the testimony of the truth of the gospel will burn brighter in each of your hearts when you graduate than it did when you first came here as a freshman.

I know of President Bateman’s outstanding testimony, courage, and ability. I had the privilege of being assigned with him to reorganize a stake in Arkansas. It wasn’t until Sunday morning that he said he hadn’t slept for two nights because of a shoulder injury that had occurred before leaving on the conference assignment. Instead of letting the Brethren know of his disability, he accepted the assignment and endured the pain. His heart is similar to Nathanael of old, of whom the Savior said, “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (John 1:47).

One of the major messages of our Lord and Savior was to be righteous within our hearts. Jesus, who knows with complete clarity and compassion all the diverse ways of sin, spoke

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*Joseph B. Wirthlin was a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 21 January 1997.*

with special intensity and passion about the soul-destroying effects of hypocrisy. He despised hypocrites—those who feign righteousness and make a public display of it but are in reality shams and frauds. Jesus intoned, “Ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity” (see Matthew 23:27–28).

The antithesis of hypocrisy is integrity, with its connotation of wholeness of spirit and completeness of personality. How glorious is integrity! Those who have it display a constancy of character. Their behavior is the same in private as in public. Their goodness is not dependent on whether someone is watching. Their actions are based on principle, not expediency. Perhaps that is what Jesus had in mind when he said, “He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me” (John 14:21; emphasis added).

A true measure of whether one has integrity, therefore, is provided by an honest answer to the following question: Am I righteous when no one is watching? Your answer to that simple query tells much about your true character.

The constancy of character that distinguishes a person of integrity comes only if one’s actions are rooted in principles. Faced as we all are with the recurring need to make choices throughout life, we must base our decisions on firm and inflexible principles if we are to escape “the pollutions of the world” (2 Peter 2:20).

Our behavior, both public and private, does not happen by accident. It is the product of conviction, resolution, and habitual practice. We become what we believe; we practice the principles that are etched upon our souls. When the moment of decision is upon us, we act according to the principles that have become internalized in our hearts and minds. The following news story, which was widely circulated in 1982, provides vivid evidence that, when faced with the unexpected, our actions are dependent on the principles we

believe in.

*Moments after Air Florida’s Flight 90 left the runway at Washington’s National Airport, it was clear that the Boeing 737 was not going to fly. As it shuddered and stalled, the co-pilot said, “We’re going down,” and the pilot answered grimly, “I know it.” With a deafening crash it slammed into the Fourteenth Street Bridge and plunged into the icy waters of the Potomac. Witnesses watched in horror as the fuselage, which had broken free of the tail section, rolled gently and sank beneath the surface, its rows of passengers still strapped into their seats. Only the tail remained afloat—with six people clinging to it.*

*One of them was Arland D. Williams, Jr., a balding, graying, middle-aged bank examiner and father of two, who was on his way to an investigation in Florida. Although divorced two years previously, he was soon to be remarried and was probably the one with the best chance, for while the others had broken limbs and collapsed lungs, he was relatively free of injury. All he had to do was hang on until help arrived.*

*At 4:20, nineteen minutes after the crash, the rotors of the U.S. Park Police helicopter were heard thwacking through the cold winter air. Bert Hamilton, who was treading water about ten feet from the floating tail, took the single lifeline dangling beneath the chopper and passed it under his arms. The others watched while the helicopter carried him a hundred yards to the Virginia shore and returned. This time Arland Williams caught the line. Instead of wrapping it around himself, however, he passed it to flight attendant Kelly Duncan. Soon she too was safe.*

*On its third trip back to the wreckage, the helicopter trailed two lifelines, for its crew knew that survival in the river was now only a matter of minutes. One of the lines was aimed at Williams. He caught it again and again passed it on, this time to Joe Stiley, the most severely injured survivor. Stiley slipped the line around his waist and grabbed Priscilla Tirado, who, having lost her husband and baby, was in complete hysteria. Patricia Felch took the second line, and the helicopter pulled away.*

*Before it reached the shore, however, Priscilla Tirado lost her grip and fell back into the water, so the helicopter, on its next trip, had to return for her.*

*Arland Williams' turn came at last. The chopper crew was eager to meet him and salute his selfless heroism. But, as they approached the wreckage, they saw that he was gone. It was 4:30. He had been in the paralyzing cold for twenty-nine minutes—a minute or so too long.*

*Rescue Officer Gene Windsor wept as he related the incident to his wife. "He could have gone on the first trip," said the pilot, Donald Usher, "but he put everyone else ahead of himself. Everyone." [News story quoted in Robert F. Bennett, *Gaining Control* (Salt Lake City: Franklin Quest Company, 1987), pp. 35–36]*

The virtue of a life based on sound principles is shown in the story of Corrie ten Boom, a devout Dutch Christian who was imprisoned in the infamous women's concentration camp at Ravensbrück during World War II because of her Christlike service in providing refuge to Jews and others. Corrie's beloved sister, Betsie, was imprisoned with her. While in Ravensbrück, the two sisters held a nightly worship service at which they read from a Bible Corrie had smuggled past the sadistic guards. They read first in Dutch and then translated aloud in German. And then, said Corrie:

*We would hear the life-giving words passed back along the aisles in French, Polish, Russian, Czech, back into Dutch. They were little previews of heaven, these evenings beneath the light bulb. . . . And I would know again that in darkness God's truth shines most clear. [Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 201]*

Nearly 100,000 other poor souls also knew that "in darkness God's truth shines most clear."

Betsie died, the victim of starvation, abuse, and disease. Corrie miraculously survived.

Through a clerical error her papers were stamped *Entlassen* (released). A week later all women her age were taken to the gas chambers.

After the war was over, Corrie spoke often about her horrifying experiences. On one such occasion, at a church service in Munich, she saw one of her former tormentors, the former Nazi who had stood guard at the shower-room door in the prisoner-processing center at Ravensbrück. Corrie wrote:

*And suddenly it was all there—the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face.*

*[The former guard] came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, Fräulein." he said. "To think that, as you say, He [Christ] has washed my sins away!"*

*His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.*

*Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.*

*I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.*

*As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.*

*And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, he gives, along with the command, the love itself. [*The Hiding Place*, p. 238]*

The principles by which all true Latter-day Saints live are embodied in the covenants they make with God. These include covenants referred to by Alma the Elder as he baptized in the Waters of Mormon:

*Ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light;*

*Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death. [Mosiah 18:8–9]*

You will have noted, no doubt, that these covenants relate to your relationships with other people.

King Benjamin, in his great valedictory address to his people, aroused them to an exalted understanding of their relationship to God. They cried, as it were, with one voice, saying:

*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. . . .*

*And we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days. [Mosiah 5:2, 5]*

These covenants relate to our relationship with God. We see that we make two different types of covenants with God. One type is highly personal, reflecting our relationship only with him. The other type relates to our relationship with other people. Of course, both types are intertwined and interconnected. They cannot be separated. As we learn wisdom, we come to understand that “when ye are in the

service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17).

Before we discuss the implications of these covenants in our everyday lives, I mention another covenant commandment God has given to his children. I mention it because it is increasingly honored more in the breach than in the observance, in this and in many other lands. The commandment to which I refer is found in the revelation that has come to be known as “the law of the Church” (D&C 42):

*Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her and none else.*

*And he that looketh upon a woman to lust after her shall deny the faith, and shall not have the Spirit; and if he repents not he shall be cast out. [D&C 42:22–23]*

Though written in terms of men, this commandment applies equally, of course, to women as well.

“But,” some of you may say, “that commandment to love thy wife (or husband) with all thy heart speaks to those who are married, and I am not.” May I simply suggest that each of us ought to be true to our future eternal partner, even if we have not found him or her yet. The importance of keeping oneself clean, pure, and worthy of an eternal partner cannot be overemphasized, even if the realization and fulfillment of that relationship lies in the future.

I have spoken briefly of covenants, the most sacred and supernal promises made between God and man. And the most sublime of them must surely be the temple covenants, with the crowning glory of eternal marriage and its promise not only of continuance but also of eternal increase (see D&C 132:19).

If we have internalized these covenants and take them seriously, they ought to be reflected in our lives—all the time, in all places, and in all things—that is, in our homes, in our business dealings, in the workplace, at school, and in our dating. They are to be more than words,

more than a formality. They ought to be more than just in our minds or written on a page. They should be engraved on our hearts. In fact, the Lord said to apostate ancient Israel, “The days come [when] I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel. . . . I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:31, 33; see also Hebrews 8:10, 2 Corinthians 3:2–3).

What is meant by having the laws of God written in our hearts? References to hearts have to do with desires, longing, yearning—what the most inner self really wants. The natural man within us craves the things of the world. To have the law of God written in our hearts, we must undergo a change of heart. We must be changed from our “carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness” (Mosiah 27:25). We must be “born again,” or “born of God,” or “born of the Spirit,” as were Alma the Elder and the people to whom he preached (see Alma 5:11–19); Alma the Younger (see Mosiah 27:23–29, Alma 36:10–22); and King Lamoni and his servants (see Alma 19:33–34). Hosts of others had their disposition to do evil replaced by a strong desire to do good continually. That made them “firm and steadfast in the faith” (Helaman 15:8). To such changed hearts, keeping the commandments of God—including the sacred covenants we have made at baptism and at the altars of the temple—is not burdensome or bothersome because then we love righteousness and *want* to do the will of God.

If we live the law of God, Satan will not be able to tempt us as easily as if we break the laws of God.

Ask yourself, If my heart has not been so changed, where do I start? How can I make such a change in my own life? Alma wrote that it all begins with even a “desire to believe” (Alma 32:27), with voluntary humility, and with a willingness to try an experiment with the word of God. He wrote that we can plant a seed and then nourish it with patience and

obedience (see Alma 32). Nephi affirmed that this change requires “full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent” (2 Nephi 31:13). Samuel the Lamanite testified that the process can begin by believing the holy scriptures and the prophets, “which leadeth them to faith on the Lord, and unto repentance, which faith and repentance bringeth a change of heart unto them” (Helaman 15:7).

Will hearts once changed always remain changed? Not necessarily. Alma, after preaching about being spiritually born of God and having his image in our countenances, asked his fellow disciples of Christ in Zarahemla, “And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren, if ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, *can ye feel so now?*” (Alma 5:26; emphasis added). Alma seemed to acknowledge that the change of heart, the desire for righteousness, can be lost. It can be lost when our lives are out of harmony with the teachings of our Lord and Savior. When we offend the Spirit by being disobedient or even by being casual about our covenants, our desires for righteousness wane and we drift away from righteousness.

For those whose hearts truly have been changed, the Lord promised: “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). President Brigham Young commented on this principle:

*They who try to serve God and still cling to the spirit of the world, have got on two yokes—the yoke of Jesus and the yoke of the devil, and they will have plenty to do. They will have a warfare inside and outside, and the labor will be very galling, for they are directly in opposition one to the other. Cast off the yoke of the enemy, and put on the yoke of Christ, and you will say that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. This I know by experience. [JD 16:123]*

Must we take a very long time to come to love the truth and want to keep the commandments?

We must always remember that eternity is now and not some abstract time we look forward to in some far-distant future. You and I are living at this moment in a very important part of eternity. If we understand this truth, we will find it easier to make wise decisions in the many choices placed before us each day. We will be less likely to clutter our lives with frivolous, time-consuming dead ends that are unimportant in the eternal perspective.

Yes, brothers and sisters, we are living in one of the most critical parts of all eternity because we are living in the day of our mortal probation. Concerning mortality, the Lord said: “We will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abraham 3:25). We read in the Book of Mormon that “this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors” (Alma 34:32).

The questions we might pose to ourselves are “Do I merit the blessings of eternity with the life I am presently living?” or “How am I spending eternity now?” If we make every earthly decision with eternity in mind, we shall have used our mortal probation wisely.

At the tender age of 18, J. Reuben Clark wrote these words:

*Self control is something that we should all cultivate, for upon exercise of our mind over our bodies, which constitutes self control, depends our future prosperity and usefulness in this world, and our salvation in the next. Shakespeare tells us that, “Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners.” Or in other words we can so control our minds that it will make us [Christlike] human beings. . . . If we firmly resolve to do anything we generally accomplish it. . . . If we resolve in our minds that we will make of ourselves good, honorable, honest, virtuous, and industrious men, and*

*keep this resolve firmly rooted in our minds, we will surely become that kind of a person . . . who is respected by his friends, who secures the affection of his family ties, and who is loved by his God.*

[J. Reuben Clark, *Selected Papers*, ed. David H. Yarn, Jr. (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1984), p. 263]

What we need to do is commit to become serious about being truly covenant people of the Lord. If we have real intent and are willing to follow, the Holy Ghost will guide our lives in sure paths; we will meet the expectations the Lord has for us as his covenant people and we will surely receive the promised blessings.

May we live out our lives in obedience to sacred covenants. May we be righteous when none save God witnesses our actions. May we be motivated by principles and not by expedience, having God’s laws written in our hearts, his image in our countenances. May “virtue garnish [our] thoughts unceasingly; then shall [our] confidence wax strong in the presence of God. . . . The Holy Ghost shall be [our] constant companion, and [our] scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth” (D&C 121:45–46). May we remember that today is an important part of eternity and live to be sure our days of probation will give us peace in this life and eternal life in the world to come.

Each one of you is a child of God. He loves you and longs for your happiness.

During this year President Gordon B. Hinckley has relentlessly traveled throughout the world, giving 187 talks. In October 1996 general conference, the prophet said, “I have determined that for so long as I have the strength to do so, I will get out and meet with the Saints I love, both the youth and the adults” (Gordon B. Hinckley, “This Thing Was Not Done in a Corner,” *Ensign*, November 1996, p. 48). He is living those words and those he spoke at his first press conference after being introduced as our new prophet in March 1995. He said then:

We [the First Presidency] are dedicated, as have been those before us, to teaching the gospel of peace, to the promotion of civility and mutual respect among people everywhere, to bearing witness to the living reality of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to the practice of his teachings in our daily lives. . . .

. . . Our theme will be to carry on the great work which has been furthered by our predecessors who have served so admirably, so faithfully, and so well in the great traditions of this church—building family values, fostering education, building a spirit of tolerance and forbearance among people everywhere, and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[Quoted in Jay M. Todd, “President Gordon B. Hinckley: Fifteenth President of the Church,” *Ensign*, April 1995, pp. 5–6]

About you, President Hinckley has said:

*I meet young people everywhere who are wonderful and faithful; youth who want to do the right thing and who indicate the reality of what I have been*

*saying for a long time, that we’ve never had a better generation of young people in the Church than we have today. They are faithful. They are active.*

*They’re knowledgeable. They are just a great generation, notwithstanding the environment in which many of them are growing up. [Quoted in Dell Van Orden, “Pres. Hinckley Notes His 85th Birthday,” *Church News*, 24 June 1995, p. 6]*

I bear testimony that President Gordon B. Hinckley is the Lord’s chosen prophet today, and I bear unwavering testimony that our Heavenly Father and his Divine Son, Jesus Christ, guide the affairs of this great Church. We must all understand that the gospel is everlasting. It is forever and applicable to all, and each of us is to be held accountable. The gospel has been restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith. May the Lord bless us to keep his commandments, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.