

Flaxen Threads

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I thank President Condie for that generous introduction. It was so flattering that it reminds me of an experience I had recently with President Marion G. Romney. I walked into the Church Office Building, stepped on the elevator, and he was there. He looked a little bit weary, so I thought I would cheer him up. I asked him how he was.

He said, "Oh, about average."

I said, "Well, President, average for you is superior for most of us."

He smiled, looked at me, and said, "Boy, you are very kind, but you are not the least bit honest."

President Condie mentioned that I am somewhat at ease on a basketball court, or at least I used to be. When I left the University of Utah years ago, I tried very hard to stay in shape. I continued to play basketball in an effort to retain my skills. But I sustained an injury and was forced to undergo a back operation. The operation was torture, and the long period of convalescence much the same. Finally, when the doctor was ready to give me release, I asked him if I could play basketball again. He looked at me, smiled a little bit, and said, "Carlos, you go home, and you read 1 Corinthians 13:11."

I returned home, opened my Bible, and read:

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

That was enough to retire me.

It is a pleasure and a distinct honor, my brothers and sisters, to be in your presence this evening; and I hope and pray that the Spirit of the Lord will help me deliver the message I have in mind.

Bound with Flaxen Thread

I have invited two young men, Elder Brockman and Elder Robey, to help me introduce my subject. Will you two please step forward. You will note that both have their wrists bound together. Though you may not be able to see the material that I have used in binding my friends, it is the same for each—flaxen thread.

Elder Robey's wrists are tied with only one strand of the flaxen material. I will now invite him to muster all his strength and courage and break free. (Pause) Did you notice how easy and effortless that was?

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Elder Brockman's wrists are tied with twenty strands of the flaxen thread. I now ask him to do what Elder Robey did. (Pause) If you were close to the pulpit, you would see that my captive is really trying to break his cords. You would also observe that, as he strains to break the thread, it is beginning to make indentations in his wrists, and, if he were to continue much further, I think it would cut and draw blood. Thank you very much.

Bound by Habits

I have engaged you in this simple demonstration to make a point. Suppose each strand of thread used in binding these young men represented one bad habit. From the demonstration, we might conclude that a single bad habit has limited restricting power. A number of bad habits, however, has great power—almost limitless power.

"The chains of habit," said one man, "are too small to be felt until they are too strong to be broken" (Samuel Johnson).

Plato, it is said, once rebuked a person for engaging in a gambling game. When the person protested that he had only played for a trifle, Plato replied, "The habit is not a trifle" (*Home Book of Quotations*, Burton Stevenson (ed.) [New York: Dodd, Mead, 1956], p. 845).

When I taught at this institution, I worked with students who *fitted*, *floated*, or *failed*. Those who fitted came with purpose, high resolve, and good work habits. Those who floated appeared on the scene for a semester or two and faded away to something less challenging when their grades finally caught up with them. Those who failed lacked the commitment and discipline required of a person in an institution of higher learning.

It seemed to me that most of the failures were shackled by poor habits. Some were not in the habit of attending class regularly; some were not in the habit of reading required texts; some were habitually late in submitting assignments; some were not in the habit

of budgeting time and energies; and some were not even conditioned to work. In all too many cases, so it seemed to me, one weakness seemed to breed upon another, and what appeared at first to be a flaxen habit proved to be a strong inhibiting cord.

A Spanish proverb reads: "Habits are at first cobwebs, then cables." I suspect that most students come here with pure intent. They register, select their courses of study, and attend their classes with high hopes of attaining declared goals. But, when one becomes careless, when one permits resolve to sag, slouchy habits appear, and academic anemia sets in. This malady comes web by web until learning and growing are choked off by the cables of intellectual inactivity.

More than a decade ago, a young man wrote President Ernest L. Wilkinson of this institution and asked what he should do to become a successful leader. President Wilkinson responded with some wise counsel. He included in his counsel this quote from the philosopher and psychologist William James:

The hell to be endured hereafter, of which theology tells, is no worse than the hell we make for ourselves in this world by habitually fashioning our characters in the wrong way. Could the young but realize how soon they will become mere walking bundles of habits, they would give more heed to their conduct while in the plastic state. We are spinning our fates, good or evil, and never to be undone. Every smallest stroke of virtue or of vice leaves its never so little scar. The drunken Rip Van Winkle, in Jefferson's play, excuses himself for every fresh dereliction by saying, "I won't count this time!" Well! He may not count it, and a kind Heaven may not count it; but it is being counted none the less. Down among his nerve-cells and fibers the molecules are counting it, registering and storing it up to be used against him when the next temptation comes. Nothing we ever do is, in strict scientific literalness, wiped out. Of course this has its good side as well as its bad one. As we become permanent drunkards by so

many separate drinks, so we become saints in the moral, and authorities and experts in the practical and scientific spheres, by so many separate acts and hours of work. Let no youth have any anxiety about the upshot of his education, whatever the line of it may be. If he keeps faithfully busy each hour of the working-day, he may safely leave the final result to itself. He can with perfect certainty count on waking up some fine morning, to find himself one of the competent ones of his generation, in whatever pursuit he may have singled out. [Letter from Ernest L. Wilkinson to Bryce V. Redd, 2 Mar. 1971, pp. 2–3. Quoted from James, William, *The Principles of Psychology*, Great Books of the Western World, vol. 53. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952]

I would remind you “walking bundles of habits” that there is a relationship between thoughts, actions, habits, and characters. After the language of the Bible we might well say: “Thought begat Action; and Action took unto himself Habit; and Character was born of Habit; and Character was expressed through Personality. And, Character and Personality lived after the manner of their parents.”

A more conventional way of linking the above concepts is found in the words of C. A. Hill: “We sow our thoughts, and we reap our actions; we sow our actions, and we reap our habits; we sow our habits, and we reap our characters; we sow our characters, and we reap our destiny” (*Home Book of Quotations*, p. 845).

Missionary Character Born of Habit

I have often referred to and preached of a “missionary character”—one of the most desired character of all, in my opinion. This character, I feel, is the sum of all the good habits acquired through selfless day-by-day service and obedient living. It is molded slowly, as the ambassador of righteousness shares the gospel of Jesus Christ and seeks to save souls.

As missionaries completed their work in the Texas North Mission, where I served, I

would invited them to sit down, to reflect, and to list all of the habits which they felt they had acquired during their terms of service. Most lists would include phrases like this:

- The habit of rising and retiring early.
- The habit of praying frequently.
- The habit of studying the scriptures regularly.
- The habit of exercising daily.
- The habit of working hard, consistently—and on and on it would go.

When the list was complete, I would ask the missionary to identify those habits which he felt he should break and discard upon his return home and his subsequent release. Nearly every missionary would eye his list carefully and respond something like this: “President, I can see only one habit which I can afford to place aside.”

“What is that?” I would ask.

Invariably the missionary would conclude, “I can drop my daily tracting.”

If character is truly born of habit—and it is—it is vital that all of us understand the process of habit formation. Not only will this process, if applied, enable us to refine character, but it will also assure us success in our missions in the mission field, at home, at school, or wherever.

Steps to Good Habits

Now, I am no expert on the subject of habit. Nevertheless, I would like to share with you some steps which I feel are involved in the cultivation of a desirable habit.

First, you must *define the desired habit*. You must identify it, verbalize it, and write it down. You should be as specific as possible. For example, you might write: “I shall attend all of my classes this semester and arrive on time.” Or, “I shall attend Church worship services every Sunday without fail this year.” Chances of successfully acquiring the new habit depend much upon how clearly you plant it in your mind and in your heart. Fuzzy or vague resolves are usually short lived. You

know that as well as I. A firm and definite declaration of intent has staying power. Joshua did not say to the children of Israel: “Choose, if you like, within the next month or so, whom ye will serve. But as for me and my house, we may, if all goes well, serve the Lord.” With firm resolve and clarity of purpose he declared:

Choose you this day whom ye will serve. . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.
[Joshua 24:15]

Second, you must *bind yourself to act* and to honor your declared resolve. Through the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord taught the Saints how to benefit from meetings and conferences. He instructed that the Saints meet together and instruct and edify one another; and, so that the instruction would not be spent and lost, he asked that we bind ourselves to act. The Lord’s words are: “And ye shall bind yourselves to act in all holiness before me” (D&C 43:9). I feel that one binds himself best to a desired action by sharing his resolve with a friend, with a wife, with a husband, with a bishop, or with someone else who can monitor his progress. I also feel that one finds strength as he shares his desires with God and begs for divine assistance.

Third, you must *put the new mode of conduct into operation*. Just thinking about church or class attendance is not sufficient. Thoughts must be supported by action. The old adage “Practice makes perfect” certainly applies in this case. And with each planned and proper action, one repetition after another, comes added strength. President Heber J. Grant often quoted this statement from Emerson:

That which we try to do, and persist in doing, becomes easy to do, not because its nature is changed, but because our power to do is developed.
[Josiah Gilbert Holland (Timothy Titcomb, pseud.), *Gold-Foil: Hammered from Popular Proverbs* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1859), 291]

President Grant practiced what he preached. He tells this story of how he attempted to polish some singing skills:

Upon my recent trip to Arizona, I asked Elders Rudger Clawson and J. Golden Kimball if they had any objections to my singing one hundred hymns that day. They took it as a joke and assured me that they would be delighted. We were on the way from Holbrook to St. Johns, a distance of about sixty miles. After I had sung about forty tunes, they assured me that if I sang the remaining sixty they would be sure to have nervous prostration. I paid no attention whatever to their appeal, but held them to their bargain and sang the full one hundred. One hundred and fifteen songs in one day, and four hundred in four days, is the largest amount of practicing I ever did.

Today [1900] my musical deafness is disappearing, and by sitting down to a piano and playing the lead notes, I can learn a song in less than one-tenth the time required when I first commenced to practice. [GS, p. 354]

Fourth, you must *bolster your will or desire* by riveting your mind upon the virtues of the desired habit. A man does not lick the smoking habit by relishing the pleasure of a cigarette. But rather, he gains resolve by thinking about the added health and vitality and money savings which he will realize when free of the habit. Motivation to lose weight comes by anticipating the increased good looks and vitality, not by savoring caloric foods and exotic dishes.

In the scriptures, we read of good desires and wills. Alma taught:

I know that he [God] granteth unto men according to their desire, . . . yea, I know that he alloteth unto men. . . according to their wills. [Alma 29:4]

So, when you have made your resolve, build your case, and build your will. Gather data, identify reasons, and do whatever you can

to justify your struggle in acquiring the new habit.

Fifth, you must *not look back or permit exceptions to occur* once you have embarked upon your new course of action. No exceptions! Famous last words for the alcoholic are: "Just one more sip. I'll drink only this one, and then it's back on the wagon." Can't you just hear Lot's wife saying, as they raced away from Sodom, "Hold up for a minute; let me take one more look at the city." That was a fatal and very salty mistake (see Genesis 19:15–26).

Once we have determined the new habit or the improved pattern of living, we must guard against any inclination to deviate. No exceptions must be tolerated and no excuses invented. For every breach of our new resolution returns us to point zero, or below, and adds strength to the behavior we are trying to conquer.

"Look not behind thee" (Genesis 19:17), were the Lord's words to Lot and his company, and those words apply to you and to me as we seek to improve our lot.

Sixth, you must *plunge wholeheartedly into the new program of conduct*. Wholeheartedly: You do not let go of old habits gradually and move into new ones slowly. You do not taper off from the old, because that only prolongs the struggle. It also provides opportunities for the old habit to increase its hold. The new habit, if it is to survive, must be favored in every possible way and repeated in its complete form as often as possible.

I have suggested to you six steps which may assist you in cultivating new habits. Let me review the process quickly: (1) *Define* the desired habit, (2) *bind* yourself to act, (3) *put* the new conduct into operation, (4) *bolster* your will or desire, (5) *do not look back*, and (6) *plunge wholeheartedly* into the new conduct.

Take One Small Step at a Time

As you follow these steps, please bear in mind the need to take one resolve at a time.

The big problem with most of our New Year's resolutions is that the list is generally too long and too ambitious. It seems that our tendency to forsake resolves increases as the list grows. I believe that one resolve made and kept is better than a dozen made and abandoned. Therefore, move forward in your progress one step, one habit at a time.

I find wisdom and inspiration in the lyrics of a song written in honor of some United States astronauts. You may recognize these words:

One small step for man,

One giant leap for mankind.

There isn't a thing that man cannot do,

If he takes one small step at a time.

[R. Harris, "One Small Step," sung by Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Columbia MS 7399]

You should also bear in mind the need to take advantage of your rather "plastic" state. Please understand that everyone becomes more and more fixed in his habits as he becomes older. While you are younger and relatively malleable, form habits that will work to your advantage rather than habits that will enslave. Make every effort to maintain the tendency to grow and to improve.

I like the words of Hubbard:

It may not be out of place to say that every man (and [every] woman) is controlled by Habit. When Habits are young they are like lion cubs, easily managed, but later there comes a time when they manage you. Bad Habits may put you on the Avernus Jerkwater, No. 23, with a one way to Nowhere. Good Habits are mentors, guardian angels, and servants that regulate your sleep, your work, your thought. [Selected Writings of Elbert Hubbard (New York: William H. Wise, 1922), vol. 2., p. 195]

Sin, Brother of Bad Habits

At the beginning of this presentation, I conducted a simple demonstration. I used a flaxen

thread in handcuffing two young men. The thread was used to illustrate the binding powers of bad habits. Permit me now to turn your minds to sin, the older and the uglier brother of bad habits.

Sin, much like habit, can enter one's life in a seemingly innocuous way. It can begin small and occupy only a corner of our lives. Yet, if left unattended, countenanced, and allowed to flourish, it can consume one's soul.

An ancient American prophet understood perfectly well this concept of which I speak. He referred to the devil as the founder of sin and works of darkness and warned: "He [the devil] leadeth them by the neck with a flaxen cord, until he bindeth them with his strong cords forever" (2 Nephi 26:22).

Those who become followers of the evil one do not generally reach their captive state with one misdeed. They lose their freedom one sin at a time—one error after another—until almost all is lost. Flaxen cords are transformed into awful chains of steel as one allows oneself to follow the downward course. Each easy step away from the line of goodness and truth makes it more and more difficult to recover.

More than 2500 years ago, the prophet Nephi predicted the conditions of our day. Among other things he said,

There shall be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die; and it shall be well with us.

And there shall also be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify in committing a little sin; yea, lie a little, take the advantage of one because of his words, dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this; and do all these things, for tomorrow we die; and if it so be that we are guilty, God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God. [2 Nephi 28:7–8]

Nephi labeled such teachings as "false and vain and foolish doctrines" (2 Nephi 28:9), and stated further:

The devil will grasp them with his everlasting chains. . . .

And others he will 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.

And behold, others he flattereth away, and telleth them there is no hell; and he saith unto them: I am no devil, for there is none—and thus he whispereth in their ears, until he grasps them with his awful chains, from whence there is no deliverance. [2 Nephi 28:19, 21–22]

Several years ago, in a large city, my wife and I saw a sign in front of a church with this notice with this notice on the bulletin board: "Sunday Worship Services, 10:00 a.m." And below that, "Sunday Sermon Topic: Nice Sins for Good People." Though I did not attend these services, I have wondered ever since about the flattering and the pacifying and the lulling and the ear tickling that must have taken place in that setting.

Do not be deceived! There are no niceties, no goodnesses associated with sin, however small or large the transgression may appear. King David's flaxen-thread glance at Bathsheba resulted in the strong cords of adultery and death. The little murmurs of Laman and Lemuel led to the big breakup of a family and the splitting of a nation. Moreover, the little errors which you and I commit can become very binding if not checked—if not checked. It is written,

His inquiries shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins. [Proverbs 5:22]

I suggest that you make a careful assessment of your life and determine your own state of affairs. Are you encumbered with so-called “nice” sins? Do you lie a little? Are you reckless with the truth? Are you perfectly honest with others? Do you gossip, do you dig verbal pits for your friends? Can you see any evidences of flaxen cords in your young lives? If so, be very careful.

Repentance like Cultivating Good Habits

I would also suggest to you, in the spirit of helpfulness, that the process of repentance is the means of escape from the clutches of sin and is not unlike the process of cultivating a desirable habit. Permit me to make the comparison:

Step one in habit formation, I said, was to define the habit. Equivalent action in repentance is *recognition of error*.

Step two in habit formation is to bind yourself to action. This step is repentance is *resolve to do better*.

Step three in habit formation is to put the new conduct into operation. In repenting, we *reform our living pattern*.

Step four in habit formation is to bolster will or desire. In repenting, we *reflect seriously upon the forgiving nature of God and Christ’s atonement*.

Step five in habit formation is do not look back. In repentance, we *refrain from committing the error again*.

Step six in habit formation is to plunge wholeheartedly into the new conduct. This action in repentance is *complete faith and reliance in the new direction one is taking*.

One Church leader describes repentance as

the process whereby a mortal soul—unclean and stained with the guilt of sin—is enabled to cast off the burden of guilt, wash away the filth of iniquity, and become clean every whit, entirely free from the bondage of sin. [MD, p. 630]

Without the hopes and prospects embodied in the principle of repentance, it is doubtful that many of us would be able to retain our balance and sanity. We do err frequently; we do fall short of the mark; we often disappoint ourselves and those around us. If a means of escape and relief through repentance were not extended us, we would probably not be strong enough to cope with life.

One sagging spirit, fettered by remorse for sin, cried out:

*I wish that there were some wonderful place
Called the Land of Beginning Again,
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches
And all of our poor selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door,
And never be put on again.*

[Louisa Fletcher, “The Land of Beginning Again,” *Best Loved Poems of the American People*, selected by Hazel Felleman (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1936), p. 101]

How blessed we are to know that there is a “land of beginning again”! This land is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the door to it is that blessed principle of repentance. When we apply this principle in the Lord’s way, cords and chains are removed, and we are freed from the enemies of our soul.

A Bad Beginning Not the End

Some years ago, on this very campus, Elder Robert L. Simpson, one of my beloved quorum associates, spoke about new beginnings and the principle of repentance. I would like to share with you just a portion of his inspired message. He said, speaking to a group much like you:

I can almost hear some of you saying at this very moment, It’s all so futile. Here I am only [38 days into the new year], and already I’ve goofed twice.

Young people, I want to assure you that you're not too far from par for the course. Just about everybody has had a bad start sometime or another. As I was watching the Rose Bowl game on television the other day, I had a flashback of something that happened to me many years ago on a high school football field not too far from that Rose Bowl. Speaking of getting off to a bad start, I think I hold the record. It was my first year in high school football. I'd been playing second string all through the practice games, and this was the first big league game. Six thousand cheering people were in the stands. As we were breaking after our halftime pep talk, the coach suddenly said, "Simpson, you start the second half."

The old adrenaline came rushing, and I went charging out onto the field. This was my chance. Just about that time the coach said, "Oh, and by the way, I want you to kick off, Simpson."

I determined right then and there that I was going to kick that ball farther than any football had ever been kicked in history. I really wanted to make a good showing on my first chance on the first string. Well, the referee waved his arm and blew his whistle. I could hear those six thousand people. I looked at that ball and came charging down the field. I felt everything tingling in my body; the excitement was so high.

Well, you have probably already guessed it. I missed the ball. . . . But that isn't half of it. This was back in the days when the quarterback held the ball with his finger. I broke the quarterback's finger.

Now, if you think that you're off to a bad start, I just want to set your mind at ease and let you know that it could be worse. I also want you to know that I had a coach that had confidence [in me] because he left me in. I don't know why, but he did, and I played the rest of the game. If I weren't so modest, I might also tell you that I made all-league that year. ["Your 1975 Game Plan," *BYU Speeches of the Year 1975* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), pp. 319–20; also *Ensign*, January 1977, p. 83]

I love that lesson that is taught in Elder Simpson's experience. A young man of less

determination might have been bound to failure by missing that ball. And, if not by that, certainly by breaking the quarterback's finger. However, Elder Simpson had "plasticity" and confidence and resolve, and he repented of his error and made all-league.

Just one week ago I heard a young man in California at a stake conference talk about repentance, or the "land of beginning again." He shared with us the sequence of actions which, over the course of years, has taught him to respect the advice and direction of his parents. This is the way he outlined it: one, Dan decides to do something; two, Dan talks to his parents; three, parents suggest to Dan that he not do it, and explain why; four, Dan does it anyway; five, Dan winds up in trouble; six, Dan doesn't do that any more. Well, that's the spirit of repentance. That's the spirit of the "land of beginning again," that glorious principle of repentance which is afforded to all of us.

You Can Avoid the Chains of Satan

As you give further thought to what I have said about bad habits and sin, I would hope that you would retain foremost in your minds a scene which Enoch was privileged to see. He saw in his vision the coming of the Son of Man, the restoration of the gospel, and many other things. He may even have seen in vision this institution. Then he heard a voice saying,

Wo, wo be unto the inhabitants of the earth.

And he beheld Satan; and he had a great chain in his hand, and it veiled the whole face of the earth with darkness; and he looked up and laughed, and his angels rejoiced. [Moses 7:25–26]

The chain held by Satan is referred to in the scriptures as "the chains of hell" (Alma 12:11), "the bands of iniquity" (Mosiah 23:12), "chains of darkness" (2 Peter 2:4), and "the everlasting chains of death" (Alma 36:18). Such chains are used in making us captives of the evil one. Normally, they are not thrown over a man or

a woman suddenly or in one single act. They start as flaxen threads and encumber a person habit by habit, sin by sin, and strand by strand. And if not cut and cast off through the process of repentance, they can become heavy chains and the awful "snare of the devil" (2 Timothy 2:26).

So, be very careful. While you are here at this institution, while you are in your "plastic" years, identify your weaknesses, replace bad habits with good ones, and avoid any and every appearance of evil. I have one desire for all of you, and that desire is that you will succeed in your academic and religious lives. Please be careful. Do not allow the chains of Satan to fall upon you. Do not allow those little

threads to encircle you about. Throw them off. Cut them loose. Do not allow him to make you his. Satan is very uncomfortable, he is very miserable, and he seeks to make you and me miserable like unto himself.

God bless you, my friends. I bear testimony to you that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored to the earth. I have perfect confidence in the principle of repentance. I know that Christ did atone for your sins and mine, if we will but repent. May we take advantage of that which he has provided us and use his grace in moving ourselves forward on the important path which leads to eternal life. This is my prayer this evening in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.