

“The Lord Looketh on the Heart”

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As an anatomy and neuroscience teacher, I have the great privilege to study and teach about one of God’s greatest creations: the human body. I marvel every time I listen to a beating heart or watch an electrocardiogram measure a heart’s electrical activity. It is remarkable to me to watch skin slowly repair itself following a scratch or to think about where and how memories are stored in the brain.

When I was a graduate student, one of my research projects was to study the proteins involved in cell division. I would often watch a set of recently fertilized frog eggs split from a single cell into two, then into four, and then into eight. It all happened before my eyes, in a dish, and without the need for a microscope. It was beautiful to watch!

Life truly is a miracle. I feel the Spirit often as I learn and teach about the human body. As I discover more about how the body works, I see the hand of God more clearly in its workings.

Consider, for example, the beauty and complexity of the human heart. The heart beats on average seventy-five times each minute, 100,000 times each day, 40 million times each year. It tirelessly beats every second of every hour of every day that we live. The heart is the most heavily worked muscle in the body,

pumping every day roughly 2,000 gallons of blood through the 60,000 miles of blood vessels in the body. The heart’s valves open and close with perfect timing to ensure that blood moves the correct direction through the various heart chambers and blood vessels. The heart is a marvelous creation!

In addition to our physical heart, each of us has a spiritual heart. Just as a reliable physical heart is needed to provide nourishment to our physical bodies, a reliable spiritual heart is needed to provide nourishment to our spirits. Our spiritual heart draws us closer to our Heavenly Father. It prompts us to serve and to love each other as family members, friends, and neighbors. It burns with faith and testimony, protects against sin, and gives strength and hope in times of trial.

It is the importance of our spiritual hearts that I wish to discuss today.

In the Old Testament, following the spiritual fall of King Saul, Samuel the prophet was led to the house of Jesse in his search for Israel’s new king. As he looked over each of Jesse’s

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sons, the Lord taught Samuel, “Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature . . . : for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

Young David, although not as physically impressive or accomplished as his older brothers, was chosen by the Lord to be king because of the state of his heart. The scriptures explain that David had “a beautiful countenance” and that “the Spirit of the Lord came upon [him]” (1 Samuel 16:12, 13).

In the Book of Mormon we read of a great missionary named Ammon. As Ammon taught the Lamanite king Lamoni about the nature and character of God, he explained that God “looketh down upon all the children of men; and he knows all the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Alma 18:32).

I have come to know that this is true. God, our Heavenly Father, knows what is in our hearts. He knows our thoughts, feelings, and desires. He understands our struggles and our strivings.

Because Heavenly Father knows my heart and He knows your heart, it is beneficial for each of us to take a close, honest look at our hearts. How is your heart doing? Spiritually speaking, is it beating regularly or is it skipping beats? Is it beating strongly or is it weak and thready?

What can we do to strengthen our spiritual hearts? I would like to propose five questions for each of us to consider as we assess the health of our spiritual hearts.

A Pure Heart

First, we can ask ourselves, “Is my heart pure?”

In Psalms we read:

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place?

He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart.
[Psalm 24:3–4]

It is not easy to keep our hands clean and our hearts pure. The sins of the world are numerous and ever present. It takes vigilance. It takes foresight. It takes courage.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught:

Consider the tragic example of King David. Though a spiritual giant in Israel, he allowed himself to look upon something he should not have viewed (see 2 Samuel 11). Tempted by what he saw, he violated two of the Ten Commandments, beginning with “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). In this way a prophet-king fell from his exaltation (see D&C 132:39).

Elder Oaks continued:

Do all that you can to avoid pornography. If you ever find yourself in its presence—which can happen to anyone in the world in which we live—follow the example of Joseph of Egypt. When temptation caught him in her grip, he left temptation and “got him out” (Genesis 39:12). [“Pornography,” Ensign, May 2005]

There are countless blessings promised to those who keep their hearts pure. In Doctrine and Covenants 121 we are taught:

Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven.

The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion.
[D&C 121:45–46]

Modern-day prophets further explain:

When you are sexually pure, you prepare yourself to make and keep sacred covenants in the temple. You prepare yourself to build a strong marriage and to bring children into the world as part of an eternal and loving family. . . . Remaining

sexually pure helps you to be confident and truly happy and improves your ability to make good decisions now and in the future. [For the Strength of Youth (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 35]

Brothers and sisters, is your heart pure? Sexual sin, including the sin of pornography, quickly leads to spiritual “heart failure.” If needed, please repent and become pure. There is no feeling as deeply satisfying as the feeling that comes with complete and honest repentance.

In the Book of Mormon Alma the Younger taught his sons this truth as he testified of the power of repentance. Speaking of the pains of sin and the joys that accompany repentance, he recalled:

I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy. [Alma 36:21]

A Soft Heart

A second question to ask ourselves during our heart checkup could be “Is my heart soft?”

King Benjamin, one of the great prophet-kings of the Book of Mormon, taught his people to “becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him” (Mosiah 3:19). In essence, he emphasized the importance of having a soft heart.

The Book of Mormon provides countless examples of the blessings that accompany having a soft heart and the negative consequences that result from hard-heartedness. We can learn much from the differences between Nephi’s soft heart and Laman’s and Lemuel’s hard hearts.

When the Lord asked Lehi to take his family and leave Jerusalem to go into the wilderness,

the hard-hearted Laman and Lemuel complained against their father, saying he had led them out of Jerusalem “because of the foolish imaginations of his heart” (1 Nephi 2:11). Nephi’s response was to pray and ask the Lord what *His* will was.

I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father; wherefore, I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers. [1 Nephi 2:16]

A beloved Primary song reminds us of another example that shows the condition of Nephi’s heart:

The Lord commanded Nephi to go and build a boat. Nephi’s older brothers believed it would not float. Laughing and mocking, they said he should not try. Nephi was courageous. This was his reply:

“I will go; I will do the thing the Lord commands. I know the Lord provides a way; he wants me to obey.”

[“Nephi’s Courage,” *Children’s Songbook*, 120]

Nephi was submissive, meek, humble, and patient. He was willing to submit to all things the Lord saw fit to inflict upon him. He had a soft heart. Because of this the Lord praised and greatly blessed Nephi: “The Lord spake unto [Nephi], saying: Blessed art thou, Nephi, because of thy faith, for thou hast sought me diligently, with lowliness of heart” (1 Nephi 2:19).

One measure of the softness of our heart is to look at the extent to which we obey BYU’s honor code. Soft-hearted individuals are willing to submit themselves to all aspects of the Honor Code—even those portions that they do not agree with or understand. Those who choose to reject portions of an honor code that they previously agreed to observe might be demonstrating symptoms of a hard heart.

The Lord will bless each of us as we keep our hearts soft. He will strengthen us as we choose to be meek, humble, patient, and full of love. He will lead us and guide us as we show our willingness to submit to the will and timing of the Lord in all things.

A Grateful Heart

Next, as we evaluate our hearts, we can ask ourselves, “Do I have a grateful heart?”

Joseph Smith, in summarizing the very essence of our faith, taught, “If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, *we seek after these things*” (Articles of Faith 1:13; emphasis added). It is easier to feel the Spirit of the Lord, easier to feel close to our Heavenly Father, easier to want to be good, and easier to be happy when we look for the good in life and nurture thoughts and feelings of gratitude.

I am grateful for President Gordon B. Hinckley’s example of finding the good and his encouragement for us to do the same. He said:

I [ask] that we stop seeking out the storms and enjoy more fully the sunlight. I am suggesting that as we go through life we “accentuate the positive.” I [ask] that we look a little deeper for the good. [“Words of the Prophet: The Spirit of Optimism,” New Era, July 2001]

During the fall of 1992 I was an undergraduate student at BYU. I had been married to my wife, Daphne, for a little over a year when we learned she was expecting our first child. I was going to school year-round, slowly working through the challenging course work required of a major in microbiology. Life as a student was difficult. There was never enough time and never enough money. I am sure that many of you can relate. Thanksgiving rolled around, and Daphne and I were excited to have a short break. We decided to leave town and travel to Fruitland, New Mexico, to visit Daphne’s sister Laurie and her family.

During the drive down my mouth watered at the thought of having a full-blown Thanksgiving dinner with turkey, stuffing, potatoes, candied yams, freshly baked rolls, and homemade pies! To top it off, the sister we were visiting was an excellent cook. At the time of our visit, she was also very pregnant with her sixth child and due any day.

On Thanksgiving day Laurie’s baby decided it was time to enter the world. I spent all day watching Laurie labor at home. I helped count the time between her contractions, and my wife and I did what we could to assist her and her family. When she was whisked away to the hospital by her husband to deliver the baby, I knew that my hope of having a good Thanksgiving dinner was gone. With little time to make dinner, those of us still at home pulled out the grill and made French toast.

Feeling sorry for myself, I hopped in my car and drove for twenty minutes through the barren New Mexico landscape to the nearest town that was large enough to have restaurants. I was determined to eat something good on Thanksgiving. Upon entering town it quickly became apparent that none of the restaurants were open. Every single one was closed. I drove back and forth through town looking for any place that could feed such a desperate soul. The only place I found open was an Arby’s fast-food restaurant. As I walked into Arby’s I realized that it was completely empty. The only people present were the workers, and they looked at me as if to say, “Poor you—all alone and no place to go for Thanksgiving.”

During the drive back to Laurie’s house I continued to feel sorry for myself. I had no money. I had no time. I had no hope of graduating quickly. I was driving through the New Mexico desert alone. And I had had a lousy Thanksgiving dinner.

As I turned the car around a bend to the south, I suddenly became aware that the colors of the landscape were changing because the sun was setting. What I previously saw as a

barren desert I began to see as a land filled with beautiful buttes, bluffs, and valleys. Suddenly and unexpectedly I became filled and overwhelmed with the spirit of gratitude. The Spirit washed through and over my soul like a warm blanket. The Holy Ghost witnessed to me how incredibly blessed I really was. I felt Him so intensely that I nearly had to stop the car. On that lonely New Mexico highway I felt more powerfully than I had ever previously felt the Lord's mercy, awareness, and love.

As I look back on this experience, I am embarrassed by my previous self-pity. I didn't deserve the incredible spiritual feelings that I felt on that day, yet the Lord in His mercy saw fit to fill me with His love, light, and understanding.

On that day I learned to "stop seeking out the storms and enjoy more fully the sunlight." I learned to accentuate the positive and look more deeply for the good. I learned the importance of having a grateful heart in any circumstance.

An Obedient Heart

Another question to ask as we appraise our hearts is "Do I have an obedient heart?"

After graduating from BYU I entered graduate school to study neuroscience. The first few years of graduate school were difficult. I worked very hard in the research lab but had little to show for it. Results of lab experiments were inconsistent and progress was slow. Because graduating was dependent on research productivity, I was worried that I might never graduate. What was even more discouraging was the job outlook at the time. Getting a job in my field was highly competitive, and many graduating PhDs couldn't find jobs.

A few years into my graduate program I attended an international scientific conference in San Francisco. Several thousand cell biologists had gathered to share their research results and methods. I hoped to network with

these scientists and gather ideas and techniques to help me in my own research.

One evening, after a long day at the conference, my wife and I were relaxing in an open area of our hotel. To my surprise, seated a few feet away was one of my favorite BYU professors. Several years previously I had taken two classes from him. I loved this particular professor not only because he had been an excellent teacher of microbiology but because I had felt the Spirit strongly in his classes. There in the hotel I reached out to him, not expecting him to remember or recognize me.

Also to my surprise, he not only recognized me but knew exactly which seat I had sat in when I had been his student. I had always sat in the very back corner of the classroom. After introducing my wife and updating him about our family, I began to share my concerns about the slow progress of my research and the non-existent job market. With great anxiety in my voice, I asked him for advice.

He looked at me straight in the eyes and said, "Mike, the best way to prepare for your future is to live by your covenants."

As he said those words I experienced a great moment of clarity. He was right! The best way to prepare for my future was to live by my covenants. Daphne and I had a great feeling of peace. We were living our covenants. We were striving to be obedient in every way we knew how. We were trying our best to be a loving husband or wife. We were striving to be the best parents we could be to our four young children. We were serving diligently in our church callings. We were keeping the commandments, attending the temple, and living the gospel. We knew we could count on the Lord's blessings.

Since that enlightening day in San Francisco, I have often reflected on my BYU professor's counsel. My journal is filled with experiences and blessings that are directly linked to my wife's and my obedience to the covenants we have made with the Lord.

One of the major lessons of the Book of Mormon is summarized by the Lord in the following way: “Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence” (2 Nephi 1:20).

I offer you the same advice I received but with my own witness: The best way to prepare for *your* future is to live by your covenants! The Lord promises to support, guide, and direct those who follow Him. An obedient heart tethers our will to the Lord’s and allows us to draw upon the powers of heaven as we walk through life.

Of One Heart

A final question to raise as we consider our hearts is “Are we as individuals, families, and neighbors of *one* heart?”

When the prophet Enoch lived on the earth, “the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind” (Moses 7:18).

Remember what happened in the Americas following the Savior’s visit:

And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people.

And there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; and surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God.

*There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in **one**, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God. [4 Nephi 1:15–17; emphasis added]*

Brothers and sisters, we are a blessed people. It is a wonderful privilege to have the Light of Christ and the restored gospel in our lives. Are we seeking to live with one heart in our marriages and families, with our

roommates, or with ward members? Or do we allow contention to be in our hearts? Do we seek to serve others while tempering our own needs and wants? Remember, selfishness has no place in a Zion-like people.

President Hinckley taught:

If we are to build that Zion of which the prophets have spoken and of which the Lord has given mighty promise, we must set aside our consuming selfishness. We must rise above our love for comfort and ease, and in the very process of effort and struggle, even in our extremity, we shall become better acquainted with our God. [“Our Mission of Saving,” Ensign, November 1991]

As we strive to be Saints of God and choose to follow our Savior Jesus Christ, let us reach out in love and service to one another. May we notice and nurture the good in each other. As we do so, we will become of one heart.

An Honest Assessment

Let us review the central questions to ask ourselves as we perform an honest assessment of our hearts:

- Is my heart pure?
- Is my heart soft?
- Do I have a grateful heart?
- Do I have an obedient heart?
- Are we of one heart?

As we consider the answers to these questions, the Lord will prompt each of us through His Spirit. We will recognize more fully and more completely our talents and strengths. We may be prompted to make specific changes. Submissively making these changes will bring us closer to the Lord.

I testify of the importance and power of the Lord’s Atonement and of His ability to change hearts. I am grateful for His love, patience, and mercy. I love Him and know He is my Savior.

With all my heart I desire to do His will and to be more like Him.

As the Lord looks on each of our hearts, I pray that He will be pleased with what He

sees. I pray that He will pour out His blessings upon us as we strive to become more like Him in thought, word, and deed. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.