

Allegiance to God

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My years as a student at BYU were in the decade of the 1960s. It is hard for me to think of it as historical times, but I realize that for most of you, those years seem like ancient history. If you know something of that history, you will remember that it was a turbulent decade in the United States. There was much of dissension and protest and rebellion. Many began to question the legitimacy of authority—any authority. The words *the Establishment* became a disparaging label for government and college officials and the institutions they represented. We were advised by some younger sages, quite full of their own wisdom, not to trust anyone over 30, including parents. By the way, these “wise men” are now over 30 themselves, so I suppose we can safely ignore their advice.

This opposition to authority did not fade away with the end of that decade. If anything, the tendency has intensified. Some claim that any exercise of authority is, per se, abusive and repressive, that it infringes on their rights. You have noted, I am sure, the persistent focus on rights and the scant attention paid to responsibilities. There are those today who challenge even the authority of God. Because it is now so pervasive, if you are not careful, something of that attitude could seep into and infect your

own feelings. I want today to reinforce in your mind and in your heart the love you feel for your Heavenly Father. I want to reinforce your allegiance to God and your desire to be a fit and loyal subject in His kingdom.

At one point in the book of Helaman, the narrator, presumably Mormon, paused in his account to reflect on the proclivity of the people to reject God in times of prosperity. As the result of a severe famine, the Nephites had, at the end of the 76th year of the judges, turned to God. Within a brief nine years, however, “they began again to forget the Lord their God. . . . They did wax stronger and stronger in their pride, and in their wickedness; and thus they were ripening again for destruction” (Helaman 11:36–37). Contemplating this sad turning away that had occurred in less than a decade’s time, Mormon lamented:

O how foolish, and how vain, and how evil, and devilish, and how quick to do iniquity, and how slow to do good, are the children of men; yea, how

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quick to hearken unto the words of the evil one, and to set their hearts upon the vain things of the world!

Yea, how quick to be lifted up in pride; yea, how quick to boast, and do all manner of that which is iniquity; and how slow are they to remember the Lord their God, and to give ear unto his counsels, yea, how slow to walk in wisdom's paths!

Behold, they do not desire that the Lord their God, who hath created them, should rule and reign over them; notwithstanding his great goodness and his mercy towards them, they do set at naught his counsels, and they will not that he should be their guide. [Helaman 12:4–6]

We may each look at our own lives—at times when we have been slow to walk in wisdom's paths, when we may have set at naught the Lord's counsel and would not that He should be our guide. In hindsight it seems so irrational. Given His great goodness and mercy toward us, why should we not desire that He would rule and reign over us?

God's Right to Rule in Our Lives

If we are honest, we must first acknowledge that God has every right to direct us. We are, after all, His creation. Jacob reminded us that “by the power of his word man came upon the face of the earth, which earth was created by the power of his word” (Jacob 4:9). Benjamin made the same point with impeccable logic:

And now, in the first place, he hath created you, and granted unto you your lives, for which ye are indebted unto him.

And secondly, he doth require that ye should do as he hath commanded you; for which if ye do, he doth immediately bless you; and therefore he hath paid you. And ye are still indebted unto him, and are, and will be, forever and ever; therefore, of what have ye to boast?

. . . Ye cannot say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth; . . . ye were created of the dust of the earth; but behold, it belongeth to him who created you. [Mosiah 2:23–25]

Beyond our being His creation, made up of materials that He owns, there is the even more important fact that, through His Son, He is the author of our salvation. Thus we are eternally indebted to Him not only for our mortal lives but also for our eternal lives. Paul said, “Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us” (Hebrews 9:12). Joseph Smith testified, “That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God” (D&C 76:24)—or, in other words, born again into the kingdom of God. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has paid our ransom and satisfied justice. “He hath purchased [us] with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). In a very real sense, the Father and the Son can claim ownership of us.

Knowing these things, it is only with the most colossal arrogance that one could claim he owes no allegiance to God. There can be no argument, really. On what basis could we justify any resistance to His commandments? The case for disobedience simply does not exist.

The Blessings of Submission to God: Freedom

Even so, our submission to God is not simply a question of duty or obligation. The blessings that flow from welcoming God's rule in our lives are so enticing, and the alternative so appalling, that if we see things in their true light, we cannot be kept from walking in wisdom's paths. Among the greatest of the blessings that come from yielding to His will, though it seems ironic to some, is freedom. Let me explain.

First, we must recognize that there are only two options available to us, two paths. Alma put it this way:

Behold, I say unto you, that the good shepherd doth call you; yea, and in his own name he doth call you, which is the name of Christ; and if ye will not hearken unto the voice of the good shepherd, to the name by which ye are called, behold, ye are not the sheep of the good shepherd.

And now if ye are not the sheep of the good shepherd, of what fold are ye? Behold, I say unto you, that the devil is your shepherd, and ye are of his fold; and now, who can deny this? [Alma 5:38–39]

Other prophets have stated the same truth. Elijah said simply, “How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). I particularly appreciate Lehi’s statement:

Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself. [2 Nephi 2:27]

There is no third or neutral way. Our choice in this life is not whether we will or will not be subject to any power. We will be. Our choice is to which authority will we yield obedience: God’s or Satan’s? As Lehi stated, it is a choice between liberty and captivity. If it is not one, it is necessarily the other.

It is important that we understand this choice because not knowing the truth could lead us into serious error. As I noted at the outset, there is a philosophy abroad in the world that, in essence, places man in the role of supreme being. This philosophy argues that there is no higher law than one’s own preferences or feelings, one’s own desires and opinions. Each person becomes a law unto himself or herself and should not be subject to any other authority. By this reasoning, whatever

one feels is right for him is necessarily right, and the rest of the universe must acknowledge and accept that judgment. In Korihor’s phrase, “whatsoever a man [does is] no crime” (Alma 30:17). No one can judge the right or wrong of another’s choices.

People are not yet willing to accept the end result of this sophistry that would, for example, preclude punishment of a man who commits murder if he felt it was right for him to do it. We still want to define some actions as crimes and prohibit them because of their effects on others. But society has already moved a significant distance down the road toward nonjudgmental acceptance of any and all behavior. Adultery is no longer considered a crime in many jurisdictions despite its devastating impact on others, especially innocent parties. It is preached that such conduct is a personal choice, and the participants decide whether it is right or wrong for them. I have read of students who in their own minds cannot condemn the Nazi Holocaust because to do so would be imposing their values on others—something strictly forbidden by this code of moral relativism. Presumably such persons would not oppose any future genocide. The philosophy that makes each man or woman his or her own lawgiver clearly leads to a lawless and dismal end.

The Lord has said:

That which breaketh a law, and abideth not by law, but seeketh to become a law unto itself, and willeth to abide in sin, and altogether abideth in sin, cannot be sanctified by law, neither by mercy, justice, nor judgment. Therefore, they must remain filthy still. [D&C 88:35]

License is not liberty. Self-absorption and self-indulgence are not freedom. It is yielding to the discipline of God’s will and His love that brings true freedom—the freedom to excel, to create, to bless. The gospel, said President Gordon B. Hinckley, “is a plan of freedom that

gives discipline to appetite and direction to behavior” (Gordon B. Hinckley, “A Principle with Promise,” *Improvement Era*, June 1965, 521). This path is one of increasing knowledge and capacity, increasing grace and light. It is the freedom to become what you can and ought to be. But for your freedom to be complete, you must be willing to give away all your sins (see Alma 22:18), your willfulness, your cherished but unsound habits, perhaps even some good things that interfere with what God sees is essential for you.

My aunt, Adena Nell Gourley, told of an experience from many years ago with her father—my grandfather, Helge V. Swenson, now deceased—that illustrates what I mean. She related:

Last week my daughter and I were visiting in my parents’ home. Along about sundown my mother asked if we would like to step out on the back porch and watch Father call his sheep to come into the shelter for the night. Father . . . is a stake patriarch, and you’ll understand and forgive me when I say he is the personification of all that is good and gentle and true in a man of God.

About a block and a half away from the edge of the back lawn, five . . . sheep were quietly grazing on the stubble of last summer’s wheat field. Father walked to the edge of the field and called, “Come on.” Immediately, without even stopping to bite off the mouthful of food they were reaching for, all five heads turned in his direction, and then they broke into a run until they had reached his side and received his pat on each head.

My little daughter said, “Oh, Grandmother, how did Grandfather get them to do that?”

My mother answered, “The sheep know his voice, and they love him.” Now I must confess that there were five sheep in the field, and five heads went up when he called, but only four ran to Father. Farthest away, clear over on the edge of the field, looking straight toward Father, stood [a] large [ewe]. Father called to her, “Come on.” She made a motion as if to start but didn’t come. Then Father

started across the field calling to her, “Come on. You’re untied.” The other four sheep trailed behind him at his heels. Then Mother explained to us that some few weeks before this, an acquaintance of theirs had brought the [ewe] and had given it to Father with the explanation that he no longer wanted it in his own herd. The man had said it was wild and wayward and was always leading his other sheep through the fences and causing so much trouble that he wanted to get rid of it. Father gladly accepted the sheep, and for the next few days he staked it in the field so it wouldn’t go away. Then he patiently taught it to love him and the other sheep. Then, as it felt more secure in its new home, Father left a short rope around its neck but didn’t stake it down.

As Mother explained this to us, Father and his sheep had almost reached the [straggler] at the edge of the field, and through the stillness we heard him call again, “Come on. You aren’t tied down any more. You are free.”

I felt the tears sting my eyes as I saw [the sheep] give a lurch and reach Father’s side. Then, with his loving hand on her head, he and all the members of his little flock turned and walked back toward us again.

*I thought how some of us, who are all God’s sheep, are bound and unfree because of our sins in the world. Standing there on the back porch, I silently thanked my Heavenly Father that there are true under-shepherds and teachers who are patient and kind and willingly teach us of love and obedience and offer us security and freedom within the flock so that, though we may be far from the shelter, we’ll recognize the Master’s voice when He calls, “Come on. Now you’re free.” [Adena Nell Swenson Gourley, *I Walked a Flowered Path* (unpublished manuscript, 1995), 199–200]*

It is exciting to realize that we can expand our freedom by perfecting our obedience. In President Boyd K. Packer’s words, “We are not obedient because we are blind, we are obedient because we can see” (Boyd K. Packer, CR, April

1983, 90; or “Agency and Control,” *Ensign*, May 1983, 66).

The Blessings of Submission to God: Peace

Our yielding to God and his right to rule and reign over us brings other blessings. Among the foremost are the faith and confidence that permit us to live with peace. The Lord said to Joshua:

There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. . . .

Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest. [Joshua 1:5, 7]

If we likewise “observe to do according to all the law,” we shall also have the confidence of God being with us as He was with Moses. With the Psalmist we will be able to say, “In God I have put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me” (Psalm 56:11). Has not the Lord promised, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33)?

Years ago I presided in a Church disciplinary council. The man whose sins were the subject of the council sat before us and related something of his history. His sins were indeed serious, but he had also been terribly sinned against. As we considered the matter, my soul was troubled, and I asked to be excused to think and pray about it alone before rejoining the council.

I was standing in front of a chair in my office pleading with the Lord to help me understand how such evil could have been perpetrated. I did not see but rather sensed an immense pit with a covering over it. One corner of the covering was lifted slightly for just

an instant, and I perceived within it the depth and vastness of the evil that exists in this world. It was greater than I could really comprehend. I was overcome. I collapsed into the chair behind me. It seemed to take my breath away. I cried silently, “How can we ever hope to overcome such evil? How can we survive something so dark and overwhelming?”

In that moment there came to my mind this phrase: “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Seldom have I felt such peace juxtaposed to the reality of evil. I felt a deeper appreciation for the intensity of the Savior’s suffering, having a better, even frightening appreciation for the depth of what He had to overcome. I felt peace for the man who was before us for judgment, knowing he had a Redeemer whose grace was sufficient to cleanse him and also repair the injustices he had suffered. I knew better that good will triumph because of Jesus Christ, whereas without Him we would have no chance. I felt peace, and it was very sweet.

Joseph Smith understood this when he said, “Let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power; and then may we stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed” (D&C 123:17). The promise to those who submit to God is that His arm, His power, will be revealed in their lives. Jesus said:

Fear not, little children, for you are mine, and I have overcome the world, and you are of them that my Father hath given me;

And none of them that my Father hath given me shall be lost. [D&C 50:41–42]

To live with this assurance is a blessing perhaps greater than you can today appreciate. Most of you have not yet lived long enough to know how precious peace is. Others, despite your youth, may have experienced feelings of desperation. But all of us, soon or late, in a moment of looming disaster or wearying

confusion, having chosen God as our guide, will be able to sing with conviction, “Sweet is the peace the gospel brings” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 14).

President Gordon B. Hinckley is often heard to say words to the effect, “Things will work out” and “The Lord controls in the affairs of the Church and in the world.” In 1983 he found himself at the pulpit of the Tabernacle in April general conference, the only member of the First Presidency able to be present. President Spencer W. Kimball and President Marion G. Romney were suffering from incapacitating illnesses. I suppose President Hinckley felt somewhat alone with a weight of responsibility that few can comprehend. He recounted:

Recently while wrestling in my mind with a problem I thought to be of serious consequence I went to my knees in prayer. There came into my mind a feeling of peace and the words of the Lord, “Be still and know that I am God.” I turned to the scripture and read this reassuring statement spoken to the Prophet Joseph Smith 150 years ago: “Let your hearts be comforted concerning Zion; for all flesh is in mine hands; be still and know that I am God” (D&C 101:16).

*God is weaving his tapestry according to his own grand design. All flesh is in his hands. It is not our prerogative to counsel him. It is our responsibility and our opportunity to be at peace in our minds and in our hearts, and to know that he is God, that this is his work, and that he will not permit it to fail. [Gordon B. Hinckley, CR, April 1983, 4–5; or “He Slumbers Not, nor Sleeps,” *Ensign*, May 1983, 6]*

Those who accept God’s supremacy and act accordingly can count on His support. His power, His love, and His mercy all insure that He can and will sustain them. Those who reject God’s rule do not have access to this precious peace. “There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked” (Isaiah 48:22). Reflecting on

Korihor’s end, for example, “we see that the devil will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell” (Alma 30:60). With no promises, other than what may come from the father of lies, those who have not taken God as their guide are plagued by insecurities, looking fearfully over their shoulders at real and imagined threats to their safety and happiness. As noted in Proverbs, “The wicked flee when no man pursueth” (Proverbs 28:1).

Submission to God Must Be Voluntary and Wholehearted

Although it is God’s right to rule and reign over us, it is a right that generally He does not enforce. It is a true principle that He accepts only voluntary obedience, only that which is unforced. Moroni observed:

For behold, God hath said a man being evil cannot do that which is good; for if he offereth a gift, or prayeth unto God, except he shall do it with real intent it profiteth him nothing. . . .

For behold, if a man being evil giveth a gift, he doeth it grudgingly; wherefore it is counted unto him the same as if he had retained the gift. . . .

And likewise also is it counted evil unto a man, if he shall pray and not with real intent of heart; yea, and it profiteth him nothing, for God receiveth none such. [Moroni 7:6, 8–9]

We should not expect freedom or faith or peace or any other such gift from our divine head if our acceptance of His leadership is lukewarm or grudging. If it is ritual rather than real righteousness, we should not expect a reward. A detached, aloof allegiance is for Him no allegiance at all. Our submission must be full, wholehearted, and unstinting. “See that ye serve him with all your heart, might, mind and strength, that ye may stand blameless before God at the last day” (D&C 4:2).

You will recall Benjamin’s statement that one must become “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, even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:19). What God requires is the devotion portrayed by Jesus, who was asked to drink a cup so bitter it amazed even Him, the great Creator (see Mark 14:33). Yet He did it, “the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:7).

For God truly to reign, the first commandment—to love Him with all our heart, might, mind, and strength (see Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30)—must be first in our lives. President Ezra Taft Benson said:

When we put God first, all other things fall into their proper place or drop out of our lives. Our love of the Lord will govern the claims for our affection, the demands on our time, the interests we pursue, and the order of our priorities. [Ezra Taft Benson, CR, April 1988, 3; or “The Great Commandment—Love the Lord,” Ensign, May 1988, 4]

This is not for the fainthearted or unstable. Our submission to His will can require some wrenching sacrifices. The Lord himself observed, “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37). We do not know what may come. We must be able to say with Joseph Smith, “Whatever God requires is right” (Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, 256), and with the Savior, “I do always those things that please him” (John 8:29).

There are some significant words added to a verse in Luke in Joseph Smith’s inspired version. Luke, chapter 14, verse 27 reads: “And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.” The added words are: “Wherefore, settle this in your hearts, that ye will do the things which I shall teach, and command you” (JST, Luke 14:28). That is my plea to you. Settle it now in your heart that you will have God to rule and reign

over you, that you will walk in wisdom’s paths. Make the choice once and for all. Hold nothing back. “Offer your whole souls as an offering unto him” (Omni 1:26).

Don’t resist or resent God’s guidance; rejoice in it. Rejoice that He knows you and is willing to guide you. Rejoice that He binds Himself to bless you when you follow Him (see D&C 82:10). In an address here some years ago, President Boyd K. Packer related:

As I meet young people around the Church, they are always saying, “When will my parents ever think I have enough maturity to act for myself?” I know when with my family . . . I know that they are ready for full freedom in any field of endeavor the very minute they stop resenting supervision. At that moment I can back off, let them go alone, and really just be there to respond if they come for help. . . .

. . . We should put ourselves in a position before our Father in Heaven and say, individually, “I do not want to do what I want to do. I want to do what Thou wouldst have me do.” Suddenly, like any father, the Lord could say, “Well, there is one more of my children almost free from the need of constant supervision.” [Boyd K. Packer, “Obedience,” in “That All May Be Edified” (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 254, 257]

I can tell you what will happen to you. In yielding your will to His, God will tutor you in the successful use of moral agency. You will find freedom to be, to feel, and to do. You will be supported in all your trials. You will “bring forth as a very fruitful tree which is planted in a goodly land, by a pure stream, that yieldeth much precious fruit” (D&C 97:9). Over time your prayers will become powerful, and you will come into God’s presence, through prayer, with confidence. Because of your unweariness in seeking the Lord’s will rather than your own, He may promise you as He did Helaman’s son, Nephi, “even that all things shall be done unto thee according to thy word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to

my will” (Helaman 10:5). Your life, your personality will take on the characteristics and qualities of Christ. As B. H. Roberts observed:

The man who so walks in the light and wisdom and power of God, will at the last, by the very force of association, make the light and wisdom and power of God his own—weaving those bright rays into a chain divine, linking himself forever to God and God to him. This [is] the sum of Messiah’s mystic words, “Thou Father in me, and I in thee” —

beyond this human greatness cannot achieve.

[B. H. Roberts, “Brigham Young: A Character Study,” *Improvement Era*, June 1903, 574]

I leave you my witness that through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we may become one with God, just as He prayed that we might be (see John 17:20–23). May your reverence for these holy beings and your allegiance to them be the shining guide of your life forever, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.