

# Choice—The Crucible of Character

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**I**t was exactly thirty-nine years ago, about this time of the month, that I gave my best girl my South African diamond. We are delighted to be here today on this special Valentine's Day, and also at a time when we recognize our national leaders. I'm happy I brought my valentine with me. She will always be one of my very special heroes. She personifies as much as anyone some of the important principles I hope to articulate today.

## Our Character

It is the ultimate design and purpose of our Divine Creator that we develop a Christlike character. A noble character is the product of a life well invested. While our intellect may be the gift of God or ancestral pedigree, our character is man-made and the fruit of personal exertion. In this sense we are a co-creator with our Heavenly Father. Our character is produced from the crucible of human experience. The forging process removes impurities and tempers and shapes us so that we might realize the measure of our creation. Character is the Liahona for our moral conduct.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote,

*No doubt it is a good and desirable thing to have intelligence, sagacity, judgment, and other*

*intellectual gifts, by whatever name they may be called; it is also good and desirable in many respects to possess by nature such qualities as courage, resolution, and perseverance, but all these gifts of nature may be in the highest degree pernicious and hurtful if the will which directs them, or what is called character is not itself good.<sup>1</sup>*

Character is the power to act upon principle—the discipline to follow through with resolutions long after the spirit in which they were made has passed. As another writer states: “In the crisis of temptation, in the battle of life, when struggle comes from within or without, it is our strength, heroism, virtue and constancy—our character—which defends and secures our happiness and honor.”<sup>2</sup>

Life is a test, a formidable test, but one each of us can pass. As you know, blessings are predicated upon laws—laws that we must learn to obey if we are to be happy and successful. The scriptures teach us that we must be proven—to see if we will do that which

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the Lord commands us. To prove means “to establish or ascertain as true or genuine.” We must know what is expected of us, exercise correct choices, and be responsible for the consequences of our choices.

### Are We Accountable?

The Lord established a pattern of behavior and discipline in the Garden of Eden that is worthy of adoption. He explained the system to Father Adam and Mother Eve. Clear instruction was given. “Of every tree of the garden *thou mayest freely eat*, But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, *thou shalt not eat*.” Freedom of choice was emphasized. Father said, “Nevertheless, *thou mayest choose for thyself*, for it is given unto thee.” Father’s stand was reiterated. “But, remember that *I forbid it*.”

He established the consequence. “For in the day thou eatest thereof *thou shalt surely die*” (Moses 3:16–17; emphasis added).

You are familiar with the events that followed. The tempter beguiled Eve with half-truths, resulting in her spiritual death and mortal change. Adam made a conscious choice with the same consequences.

The wisest and noblest of us have demonstrated from the beginning that voluntary obedience to the saving truths brings joy and peace in this life and eternal happiness hereafter. We know that consequences are set as choices are made. Obedience to divine law, then, is the highest expression of love and intelligence. Rebellion, not intelligence, has been the stumbling block of many of the talented and the proud.

Within our physical world, we have choices to exercise as we gain dominion over our environment. Some great forces of nature are beyond our power to regulate. But within our environment is the world of values; here we can be in command. I am not suggesting that all are equally advantaged or disadvantaged, but I am saying that in your world of values, you can choose what you are to be.

There is in our society a subtle and pernicious philosophy that leaves a wake of distress and makes a mockery of the divine gift of agency. I believe it to be satanic in origin and the enemy of righteousness. It can be expressed in four simple words: “I can’t help myself.” Dr. William Lee Wilbanks, professor of criminal justice at Florida International University, refers to this philosophy as: the new obscenity—obscene, he says, “because it is offensive to the core concept of humanity . . . [denying] the very quality that makes us human and not simply animals.”<sup>3</sup>

He cites examples. A rapist, who had broken into the house of a twenty-six year-old woman and raped her for the third time over a three-month period, justified his actions before the jury by claiming a hormonal defect that increased his sexual appetite to the point that he couldn’t help himself. The jury bought the idea and only put him on probation.

In a more recent case, Ted Bundy confessed that, after saturating himself with pornography, he became the incarnation of his sensual appetites. This time, however, a wise judge ruled that Bundy was indeed responsible for his actions.

What about temptation, choice, appetite, habit? *Are we accountable?* As one eminent authority reported, “Temptation—resisted or indulged—has been supplanted by drives, instincts and impulses—satisfied or frustrated. Virtue and vice have been transformed into health and sickness.”<sup>4</sup> This condition leads us to echo the question of the famous psychiatrist, Karl Menninger: “Whatever became of sin?”

In our world of values and choice, is deviant behavior uncontrollable or simply uncontrolled? In my opinion, we can develop any appetite, or form any habit by repetitious behavior. When we are habituated to drug dependency or other serious transgression, can we in fairness say that we are not responsible? Was there no choice involved? It is easy to blame forces outside ourselves for our own

lack of self-discipline. To do so conveniently removes us from the encumbrance of accountability as we use the excuse “I can’t help myself.”

Dr. Wilbanks, in studying the power of human will in responsible behavior, examined the on-court activity of two professional tennis players—Bjorn Borg and John McEnroe. I quote:

*You probably remember Borg as the Swede who rarely showed any emotion on the tennis court and who decided never to be angry at the linesmen and the umpire. But Borg’s self-control was made, not born. Borg displayed an on-court temper similar to McEnroe’s when he was in his early teens in Sweden when he was known for his swearing and throwing rackets. At the age of 13 he was suspended by his tennis club for six months. And his parents supported that expulsion by locking up his racket and refusing to let him play at all.*

*Borg now says that he learned his lesson and simply decided from that day forward to control his temper—and he did.*

*By contrast, John McEnroe indicated in a recent “60 Minutes” interview that he believes he is “addicted” to his outbursts of temper.<sup>5</sup> [Emphasis added]*

It is, however, interesting to note that McEnroe said the one time he *did* control his temper was when he played Borg because “he couldn’t afford to waste one bit of energy when playing Borg.” Dr. Wilbanks concludes his example by saying McEnroe’s verbal obscenities on the court are a result of the obscene concept of addiction.

One final example from this interesting study.

*Thousands of American soldiers in Vietnam became “addicted” to hard drugs but only 14 percent remained “addicted” upon their return to the United States. The 86 percent who quit simply decided that they did not want to get involved in the*

*American drug culture. Their value system and self-discipline helped them to “Say No.”<sup>6</sup> [Emphasis added]*

News reports have recently outlined two regrettable stories regarding prominent athletes—1984 Olympic silver medalist Bruce Kimball, and Cincinnati Bengals fullback Stanley Wilson—men who have robbed themselves of brilliant sports futures by succumbing to temptation and relinquishing their self-control and self-respect to alcohol and cocaine.

Kimball, himself the past victim of a drunk driver, struggled valiantly to overcome injuries from that severe accident to contend for a place on the 1988 Olympic diving team. Now, instead of what might have been a glorious memory of standing on an Olympic platform with a medal of victory around his neck, he must live with the horrific nightmare of one evening of foolish choices that sentenced him to seventeen years in prison and the recurring guilt of having been responsible for the deaths of two teenagers.

After completing a rehabilitation program, having a terrific season, and earning a starting position in the game football players dream about most of their lives—the Super Bowl—Wilson succumbed just one more fateful time to the lure of drugs. “Cocaine,” he said, “was like a slow suicide.” At one point Wilson recalled doing drugs in his car with his five-year-old son watching. “My son looked at me and said, ‘Daddy, why are you doing this?’” A good question, Stanley—why?

And these tragedies are not the onus of athletes alone. Movie stars, politicians, religious leaders, businessmen, students, even our neighbors and friends often surrender their integrity in exchange for one momentary thrill or passion.

Arthur Berry, the jewel thief who gained notoriety by stealing jewels from the royal family, was interviewed toward the end of his life. The reporter asked him what was his largest

theft. Berry replied, “When I was young, I had all the advantages—intelligence, education, and financial means. I could have become anything I desired; I could’ve gone anywhere. But rather, I chose a life of crime. So when you write, don’t say, ‘Arthur Berry robbed the queen’s jewels.’ Put the biggest theft at the top. Simply say, ‘Arthur Berry robbed Arthur Berry!’”

Robert Benchlet said,

*One of my fears for the future stems from the fact that in recent years some of the nation’s brightest, best educated, and most richly rewarded career people have committed acts that destroy their careers and cancel all their bright promise. One interpretation is that they betrayed their values—for money, or power, or sensual pleasure. Another interpretation is that they didn’t have any values to betray, that the values had been jettisoned long ago in the swift upward climb.<sup>7</sup>*

We are not without guile in the Church; but surely we ought to be, because where much is given much is expected. In matters of character, we should stand preeminent. Integrity must be our hallmark. For Latter-day Saints who have clearly stated values and standards, the compromise of personal integrity comes *before* committing a transgression. Integrity—or another word I like, veracity—is the taproot of our value system. Veracity has been defined as “habitual observance of the truth.” It is not just knowing and thinking the truth, but it is *doing* the truth. It is instinctive honesty.

We have a classic example from the scriptures with which you are familiar. In the thirtieth chapter of Genesis we read of Joseph in Egypt. Joseph was the first role model that I remember my mother counseling me to emulate. I have loved and admired him ever since boyhood.

You will remember how the Lord blessed Joseph and how he found favor in the eyes of Potiphar, the wealthy and powerful officer of

the pharaoh. He was made overseer of Potiphar’s house and all that he had. And the Lord blessed the Egyptian for Joseph’s sake. Potiphar left all he had in Joseph’s hands and “he knew not ought he had.” In other words, so great was his trust of Joseph that he didn’t even know what he owned—“save the bread which he did eat” (Genesis 39:6).

Joseph was goodly and handsome. Potiphar’s wife found him attractive and tried to seduce him, but he refused. He reminded her that Potiphar had entrusted everything to him. “Neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” She persisted and her resisted. “He hearkened not unto her;” and he avoided her (Genesis 39:7–10.) One day she grabbed him, and the scripture records the famous clarion call of moral valor: “[He] fled, and got him out” (Genesis 39:12).

Joseph refused to compromise his integrity, his master’s trust, and his covenant with the Lord. It was a matter of personal honor before even considering the enticing advances of Potiphar’s wife.

Joseph Smith taught, “That person who never forsaketh his trust, should ever have the highest place of regard in our hearts” (*Teachings*, p. 31).

### Resisting Temptation

Anciently, the Romans worshipped virtue and honor as gods. They built two temples that were so situated that none could enter the temple of Honor without passing through the temple of Virtue, thus symbolizing the truth that all honor is founded on virtue. He whose soul is set to do right finds himself more firmly bound by the principle of honor than by legal restraints. One’s personal honor should exceed the norm of his society. As Seneca observed, “What the law does not forbid is forbidden in decency.”<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes we blame the devil for our sins. The Prophet Joseph also observed “that Satan was generally blamed for the evils which we did. . . . The devil could not compel mankind to do evil; all was voluntary.” Then he made this sobering statement: “Those who resisted the Spirit of God, would be liable to be led into temptation” (*Teachings*, p. 187).

We tend to resist or reject the Spirit first, then we succumb to temptation. King Benjamin taught: “After ye have known and have been taught all these things, if ye should transgress and go contrary to that which has been spoken, . . . ye do *withdraw yourselves from the Spirit of the Lord*, that it may have no place in you to guide you in wisdom’s paths that ye may be blessed, prospered, and preserved” (Mosiah :36; emphasis added).

We also read in the Doctrine and Covenants, “The Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit” (D&C 84:46).

Too often we place ourselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. King David, for example, “tarried still at Jerusalem” for some R and R when it was “at the time when kings go forth to battle.” In other words, he had left his post. At eventide he walked along the roof of his house and looked down at the beautiful, bathing Bathsheba. His sin began, not when he saw her, but when he lingered until a carnal appetite was quickened, uncontrolled but certainly controllable (2 Samuel 11:1–4). The rest of the story ranks among the saddest in all of our scriptures.

We recall the profound words of Thomas Aquinas: “Perfection of moral virtue does not wholly take away the passions, but regulates them.”<sup>9</sup>

My young brothers and sisters, as the earth is ripening in iniquity, we must not obscure our appreciation for the beautiful and the wholesome and the godly. We plead for sustenance of the higher values and senses within us. That is character.

In Greek mythology, Ulysses was so concerned that the seductive music of the Sirens would destroy the sailors that he plugged their ears and tied them to the mast. But Orpheus, the god of music, said that the solution was to play sweeter music than that of the Sirens.

We do not deny that sin many provide fleeting pleasure or fun, but its consequent damage to the soul produces great sorrow. We have been given sweeter music in the principles and standards of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us play God’s music; let us popularize decency. There is a better way. We have been endowed by the Lord with a spiritual power that raises us above all creatures. We are given reason and values rather than mere instinct. If we give up the reins to our impulses and passions, from that moment we surrender this higher prerogative.

Self-control is the highest form of courage. Sometimes it is necessary to stand alone against the crowd. I know that feeling. It is rarely popular. It is even more difficult to resist the pressure from members of the Church who, having compromised their own standards, apply even heavier pressure on you to surrender your own. But, as you seem to stand alone, there is another with you—even the Lord.

John, the apostle, warns of the spirit of the anti-Christ in the world and then reminds us: “Ye are of God . . . greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

“As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him,” wrote Paul, and be rooted and built up in him . . . lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men” (Colossians 2:6–8).

What does it mean to be rooted in Christ? Several years ago I was in Jacksonville, Florida, the day after a hurricane had hit. What a mess! Uprooted trees were lying across the streets, on houses, and over automobiles. What amazed me were the tall palm trees that had been uprooted. I discovered that their roots were shallow. They had run horizontally in the sand

just a few feet below the ground. When the heavy winds came, they were not anchored.

Daily, we are faced with tests that require decisions of character. “Our moral ‘muscles,’” William James wrote, “grow with exercise and use. If we want them to be strong for the times of greater temptation, we must make them strong by using them to resist the ever-recurring small temptations.”<sup>10</sup>

Society tends to place value on the basis of cost. Preeminent then, must be the value of the human soul when we consider the incomparable price paid by our Savior through his atoning sacrifice. To the Prophet Joseph Smith, he declared:

*Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God;*

*For behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him. [D&C 18:10–11]*

I believe that our conduct reflects our depth of understanding and appreciation for our Savior and his atonement. As your scriptural theme for Book of Mormon week states: “If ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, . . . can ye feel so now?” (Alma 5:26). Our love for the Lord should be our greatest motivation to live righteously. When we have a knowledge of and feeling for his suffering, how can we consciously contribute to that suffering through choosing to commit sin?

John Milton made this very incisive observation:

*He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the wayfaring Christian.*<sup>11</sup>

My beloved friends, may we always remember who we are. Let character prevail in all our choices. May we never forget that through the grace and mercy of our Redeemer, eternal life may be ours. Then, through the righteous, honest exercise of our free agency, may we be privileged at some future day to greet our Savior with confidence and to echo the words of the prophet Enos: “I rejoice in the day when . . . [I] shall stand before him; . . . [and] see his face with pleasure” (Enos, verse 27). I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

#### Notes

1. “Essay on the Metaphysics of Morals.”
2. Source unknown, Elder Clarke’s personal file.
3. William Lee Wilbanks, “The New Obscenity—I Can’t Help Myself,” *Vital Speeches of The Day*, 15 August 1988, pp. 658–59.
4. Dr. Thomas Szasz, quoted by William Wilbanks in “The new Obscenity,” p. 659.
5. Wilbanks, “The New Obscenity,” p. 661.
6. Wilbanks, “the new Obscenity,” p. 662.
7. John W. Gardner, *Stanford Business Magazine*, December 1988.
8. Source unknown, Elder Clarke’s personal file.
9. Source unknown, Elder Clarke’s personal file.
10. *Speaker’s Desk Book of Quips, Quotes, and Anecdotes*, Jacob M. Braude, ed. (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 269–70.
11. John Milton, *Areopagitica*, p. 728.