

Be Ye Therefore Perfect

SPENCER W. KIMBALL

I am very grateful indeed for this recognition. Thank you for the Exemplary Manhood Award.

I recognized, when you stood and sang “We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet” as I came into this building this morning, that you are here to recognize the leadership of the Church you love so much and not me personally. I accept your tribute in that vein. This is a very kind remembrance, and I’ll try to continue to use it and profit by it. Thank you very much.

My beloved brothers and sisters, young and older, it is a real privilege to meet with you on this occasion in this great edifice. I do appreciate, more than I can tell you, your presence and your interest and your support, which I feel very keenly.

A famous sculptor once said that there was nothing to art except just cutting away the marble that he didn’t want there. There’s nothing to attaining perfection either, except removing all the obstacles and the obstructions which defame or pollute it. We are on the road to perfection.

In one of the Lord’s first sermons was the injunction to become perfect: “Be ye therefore perfect,” he said, “even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

Personal Integrity

As we speak of perfection, there is much to consider. One must be the soul of honor, full of integrity, and above reproach. One must be true to himself, and, being thus, he cannot then be false to any man. We have made promises and covenants. The Lord has said, “I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say; but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise” (D&C 82:10).

On the Los Angeles city hall I once read this:

He who violates his oath profanes the divinity of faith itself.

And again, we have from our Holy Bible:

When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it, for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed.

Spencer W. Kimball was President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 17 September 1974.

Better is it that thou shouldst not vow, than that thou shouldst vow and not pay. [Ecclesiastes 5:4–5]

Now listen to the profound Moses:

If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth. [Numbers 30:2]

It is my understanding that when one is called to the witness stand in a court of law he is required to accept this statement: “You do solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give in the matter pending before this court shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God.” The witness has his right hand to the square, and in some instances, in some states, he will probably have his left hand on the Holy Bible, which is a symbol of truth and holiness. Should his testimony be found to be untruthful, he lays himself liable for the penalties of the court.

Commitment to BYU Standards

It is my understanding that each student who enrolls in this great institution understands before coming here what the rules and regulations are, and he or she signs the enrollment sheet with a firm promise to obey those rules and regulations. There is no argument. It is definite and firm. Each student approaches the University on his own volition. There is no compulsion.

There are many other universities in the land, some of which have far less stringent regulations. Every student should consider this well; if he objects to the rules and is unwilling to follow them, he should look elsewhere. If the location, the faculty, the courses, the leadership, and all other conditions are agreeable to him, he should weigh them carefully, then sign the pledge or oath or promise only if willing to

observe it strictly. He is most untrue to himself and to the institution to sign and then default.

When we enroll in this institution we accept the standards; that was not for the registration day only. They are to be effective so long as we retain a place in the student body of this institution. It is not a matter of whether or not one is totally converted to the rule. He or she has accepted the standards, whatever they be. We note that we signed this: “I hereby commit myself to conduct my personal life consistent with the standards of Christian living on and off campus, and I adhere to the code of honor and dress and grooming standards.” If I could not agree with the rules of BYU, I would hand back the enrollment sheet and say, “No, since I cannot agree and since I intend not to live the rules, therefore I will not pledge something that I will not do”; or “I have decided to wear immodest dresses. Therefore, I will find a school which will accept my standards”; or “I will not keep the law of chastity. Therefore, I will seek a school which does not require me to do so. I will, therefore, not enroll. I will not sign to do one thing and then do another.”

I know one man who nearly moved heaven and earth to get a position on this faculty, and then—having accepted the position, the salary, the requirements—he began at once fighting the rules, complaining at the salary, criticizing the leadership and the program. To me, he was not only unfair, but also immoral.

Honor for One’s Covenants

Again, we return to the voice of the prophets:

When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee. [Deuteronomy 23:21]

Remember that the Lord extended to man his free agency. He told Enoch:

Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency. [Moses 7:32]

Then again:

For I, the Lord, have decreed in my heart, that inasmuch as any man belonging to the order shall be found a transgressor, or, in other words, shall break the covenant with which ye are bound, he shall be cursed in his life, and shall be trodden down by whom I will;

For I, the Lord, am not to be mocked in these things. [D&C 104:5–6]

It's always refreshing to read the words of Brigham Young, who seemed always to hit the nail on the head. Listen to him. He is sharp and pointed. He says, "When you raise your hands to heaven and let them fall, then pass onward, your covenants unfulfilled, you will be cursed." I feel sometimes like severely lecturing men and women who enter into covenants without realizing the nature of the covenants they make and who use little or no effort to fulfill them. With agency one can murder, commit all the moral, sexual sins, steal, lie, use drugs, be unkind; he may hate, envy, swear, or do whatever he would like. One can hate, or one can love. One can curse, or one can bless. One can live in loneliness, or one can be promiscuous. One can help and assist, or one can hinder. One can blaspheme, or one can honor and bless and pray. One can believe in himself, or he can believe in an overall omniscient Being. One can do as he pleases. Free agency is his. Or he can live his life with the great Redeemer as the center of his life.

One can touch a hot wire, but he cannot stave off the certain death that results. One can step in front of a powerful oncoming train, but he cannot set aside the mangling that will follow. One can jump from a skyscraper, but he

cannot control the results and save his body from the crushing effects of the fall and the abrupt contact with the hard pavement below.

I think of young people who have graduated from high school and are ready to enter the university as sane young folks who are approaching maturity. If they are mature, then they should not ever need to be reminded what is right and what is wrong and what they have covenanted to do. It would certainly show immaturity if a student should need to be reminded. Surely it would be sad if grown young people could not remember their vows. For a young woman to wear short skirts or other immodest wear when she has covenanted otherwise would not be a matter of cleverness in escaping detection but a definite blot on her character—a blot not easily erased, for it would remain to come into focus a number of times in her life. Should any young man promise a certain performance in clothes or hair or behavior and then evade those restrictions, certainly his error is deep-seated and is not just a difference of opinion. It is nothing to joke about but is a black mark on his character. The scripture says it is a sin when a man so violates his vow. How can any young person rationalize it?

Importance of Appearance

Why did devotees of female-styled hair for men struggle so fiercely to encourage an unnatural adornment? "Doth not even nature itself teach you," Paul asked, "that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?" (1 Corinthians 11:14). And the same Paul said, "But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering" (1 Corinthians 11:15). Not all men whose hair is tossed back and forth are effeminate, but surely there is some question about it. How far, we wonder, will men and women go to pay ovations to the god of style? Will men wear rings in their noses when style dictates? Will young

people still fall prey to their god of style, which they worship? “Everybody does it.”

Tell me: Is it not true that the dress, the grooming, paints an immediate picture and classifies a person? The famous Jerry Rubin says:

Young kids identify short hair with authority, discipline, unhappiness, boredom, hatred of life and long hair with just “letting go.” Wherever we go, our hair tells people where we stand on Vietnam, lawless campus destructions, and drugs. We’re living TV commercials for the revolution. Long hair is the beginning of our liberation from sexual oppression.

What group do you wish to follow and with which group do you wish to identify? Will you turn down authority and discipline and rebel against everything that is? Do you wish to be in classes with men who look manly or men who look effeminate?

Now, beloved youth, we love you. We believe you are strong enough and smart enough to do the thing that will make you manly and godly for the men and sweet and feminine for the women. Remember, you can still do as you wish: buck all the conventions; rebel at all disciplined authority. But remember, others have learned their lessons early in their lives and profited thereby: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven if perfect,” says the divine authority.

Do you remember the story of Saul, the king of Israel? Saul had rationalized that his own judgments were superior to those of the Lord. He was chastised severely by the prophet Samuel, who brought forth this powerful lesson:

Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.

For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. [1 Samuel 15:22–23]

Roles of Men and Women

Now, while we are speaking of these fads and styles, may I say that it is hard for me to understand why men wish to resemble women and why women desire to ape the men. The Lord said, “And I, God, created man in mine own image, in the image of mine Only Begotten created I him; male and female created I them” (Moses 2:27). Man should be productive: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground” (Genesis 3:19), Adam was told. And unto the woman the voice of the Lord was saying, “In sorrow [or pain or distress or waiting] thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (Genesis 3:16)—or, I like the term “preside over thee.”

Then we’re appalled to find an ever-increasing number of women who want to be sexually men and many young men who wish to be sexually women. What a travesty! I tell you that, as surely as they live, such people will regret having made overtures toward the changing of their sex. Do they know better than God what is right and best for them?

Now, it is wise for every young woman to be grateful for her womanhood and her privilege to create, with her husband and the Eternal God as her partners. To be a mother, to be a wife of a good man—what a great joy! While she is waiting for that holy, sacred hour, let her be happy and content to develop her mind and accumulate knowledge and prepare herself emotionally and spiritually for the happy times.

For the young man, his education is important, his mission vital; but his proper marriage and his proper life to be a righteous father and to properly provide for and give leadership to a family—that is wonderful, a wonderful role in life to play.

Let me say, then, that perfection is still our goal. It is reached by climbing steadily upward, controlling all our desires, impulses, and urges.

It is possible. Remember that the Lord gave us Abraham as an example and quoted him often: “Abraham received all things, whatsoever he received, by revelation and commandment, by my word, saith the Lord, and hath entered into his exaltation and sitteth upon his throne” (D&C 132:29). This is not a promise; it is a reality. “Go ye, therefore, and do the works of Abraham; enter ye into my law and ye shall be saved” (D&C 132:32).

I am shocked frequently to see people who wear the worst they possess instead of their best. Grubby clothes certainly have some relationship to grubby people. There is something uplifting when people dress up and attempt to be seen at their best.

Attaining Goals

Again, as we enroll in this University, we covenant, as stated before, “I hereby pledge to conduct my personal life consistent with the standards of Christian living taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints both on and off campus.” And so when one breaks the law of the Word of Wisdom, the law of chastity in any form, the law of the Sabbath, or any of the other laws of the Church, he or she violates the covenant made. Certainly this is a difficult role to play and a difficult goal to attain, but the path has been charted and the way has been found. Man is left without excuse if he does not follow it.

During our youth and young maturity time flies with great speed. To travel listlessly is just futile. One should have a destination and a goal to reach. One should determine what he wants out of life and then bend every effort toward reaching that goal. He must realize that life is more than meat and drink and fun and fortune. However, it is often easy for us as young people to follow the line of least resistance and, like the Nephites and Lamanites on the eve of the last battle, to be found to be “even as chaff is driven before the wind, or as a vessel is tossed about upon the waves, without

sail or anchor, or without anything wherewith to steer her” (Mormon 5:18).

Paul indicated that all could attain perfection. The fact that most of us are far from perfection is not to say we can’t, but we don’t. Christ became perfect. He overcame. He suffered hunger, thirst, cold, heat, pain, sorrow, and all that life has to offer in suffering. Each time he overcame, he become more nearly perfect. Paul said:

And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him. [Hebrews 5:9]

For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. [Hebrews 2:10]

Perfection is a long, hard journey with many pitfalls. It’s not attainable overnight. Eternal vigilance is the price of victory. Eternal vigilance is required in the subduing of enemies and in becoming the master of oneself. It cannot be accomplished in little spurts and disconnected efforts. There must be constant and valiant, purposeful living—righteous living. The glory of the Lord can be had only through correct and worthy marriage and living a clean, worthy life.

In Psalms we read, “I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people” (Psalms 22:6). This is diametrically opposed to our philosophy. Certainly one is not likely to rise high who has that kind of an opinion of himself. Better far is the Psalm which places man on a higher level:

What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor.

Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet. [Psalms 8:4–6]

Then, from the worm to the god is the potential of man. When he was created, there were put into him the seeds of godhood, the power to think and to reason, the power to lift himself from beasthood to godhood, the power to heal himself and elevate himself.

Overcoming One's Environment

There are those today who say that man is the result of his environment and cannot rise above it. Those who justify mediocrity, failure, and even weakness and criminality are certainly misguided. Surely the environmental conditions found in childhood and youth are an influence of power. But the fact remains that every normal soul has its free agency and the power to row against the current and to lift himself to new planes of activity and thought and development. Man can transform himself. Man must transform himself.

Abraham did. He came out of an idol-worshipping family; yet he headed a dispensation of worshipers of the true and living God. Moses was born to poverty and slavery, was reared in luxury and court honors, and had great opportunities. He came to the heights which man can attain and walked and talked with God. Saul of Tarsus was born and reared and trained, but he completely transformed himself and became an apostle of God. Saul, the king of Israel, came of humble birth, but when Samuel had dealt with him and anointed him and trained him, he became another person. God gave him another heart and turned him into another man.

Arnold Bennett is quoted as saying:

The real tragedy is the tragedy of a man who never in his life braces himself for his one supreme effort, who never stretches to his full capacity, never stands up to his full stature. To lie down and moan

and whine about limited opportunities is the part of weaklings. To grasp the opportunities at hand and walk forward is the way of the strong.

To the Corinthians Paul said this: "And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible" (1 Corinthians 9:25). Self-mastery, then, is the key, and every person should study his own life, his own desires and wants and cravings, and bring them under control.

Man can transform himself and he must. Man has in himself the seeds of godhood, which can germinate and grow and develop. As the acorn becomes the oak, the mortal man becomes a god. It is within his power to lift himself by his very bootstraps from the plane on which he finds himself to the plane on which he should be. It may be a long, hard lift with many obstacles, but it is a real possibility.

We are not sure of the author of these lines, but let us contemplate them for just a moment:

*You may be what you will be,
But cowards find their false content
In that poor word, environment,
But spirit scorns it and is free.*

*It conquers time; it masters space,
It crows the boastful trickster chance
And bids the tyrant circumstance
Uncrown and find a servant's place.*

*The human will, that force unseen,
The offspring of a deathless soul,
Can hew its way to any goal,
Though walls of granite intervene.*

In other words, environment need not be our limit. Circumstance may not need to be our ruler, nor do granite walls or walls of steel need be our prison. In the Doctrine and Covenants we read that

no man is possessor of all things except he be purified and cleansed from all sin.

And if ye are purified and cleansed from all sin, ye shall ask whatsoever you will in the name of Jesus and it shall be done. [D&C 50:28–29]

Beginning to Become Perfect

To be perfect, then, one must begin early in his life. He or she must become the perfect husband, the perfect wife, the perfect father, the perfect mother, the perfect leader, and the perfect follower. One's marriage must be perfectly performed and perfectly kept on a hallowed plane. One must keep his life circumspect. Each person must keep himself clean and free from lusts. He must shun ugly, polluted thoughts and acts as he would an enemy. Pornographic and erotic stories and pictures are worse than polluted food. Shun them. The body has power to rid itself of sickening food. That person who entertains filthy stories or pornographic pictures and literature records them in his marvelous human computer, the brain, which can't forget this filth. Once recorded, it will always remain there, subject to recall—filthy images.

As we have stated before, the way to perfection seems to be a changing of one's life—to

substitute the good for the evil in every case. Changes can come best if we take one item at a time. For instance, it's not difficult to be perfect in tithing, for if one pays one-tenth of his income annually, he is perfect in that respect. It is not difficult to become perfect in avoiding a swearing habit, for if one locks his mouth against all words of cursing, he is en route to perfection in that matter. If one studies the scriptures with all reasonable devotion, he has approached the perfection in that matter also.

Now, young brothers and sisters and all our friends, we love you. We appreciate you. We sing frequently the song "Shall the Youth of Zion Falter?" and then we stand almost spellbound as we hear the great chorus of numerous voices saying, "No!" We're proud of you. We love to hear your testimonies. We're glad to see you, your faith in the great restoration of the gospel, and all that pertains to it. We proclaim this to be the true gospel of Jesus Christ, the maker of heaven and earth. He is our light and our life. This is his church. We praise and honor and worship him. He lives. That I know, and I bear that witness to you, with all my affection for you, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.