

Let Your Light So Shine

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It is a great privilege to be on the campus of this university—and more especially to be here tonight in the spirit of this fireside. I have prayed earnestly that, in organizing the things I would like to say to you tonight, I'd be guided by the Spirit to say what would be appropriate and helpful. I have earnestly sought, in organizing the things I would like to say to you tonight, I'd be guided by the Spirit to say what would be appropriate and helpful. I have earnestly sought for the power and influence of the Lord's Spirit to help me to convey to you the message I have brought. I trust that that Spirit will work with us, and that perhaps something in these words will prove encouraging and useful to you.

A Great Responsibility

The Lord has made it clear that each of us has a responsibility to exert an influence for good in the lives of those who share this mortal experience with us. We cannot live in isolation from others and still fulfill the purpose of our existence here. Our actions, our words, our thoughts, and our values will inevitably affect the souls of those whose lives brush against ours. In fact, the Lord himself has said that this influence may continue to reverberate long after we have departed, even to the ensuing generations (see Mosiah 13:13).

This is an awesome prospect. When we contemplate the power we have for perpetrating both good and evil in the lives of others, we have good reason to reach for careful understating of this power.

It is clear that we will be held responsible for making our influence felt. There is no safety or sanctuary in living passively or in avoiding contact with others. This is true for individuals as well as groups. Nowhere in scripture is this made more emphatic than in the Lord's injunction to Ezekiel. He said:

Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me.

When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand.

Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he

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shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. [Ezekiel 3:17–19]

To his disciples the Savior said,

I give unto you to be the salt of the earth; but if the salt shall lose its savor wherewith shall the earth be salted? The salt shall be thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men. [3 Nephi 12:13]

On another occasion he spoke of the need of our placing our light on a candlestick, not under a bushel, so that it could give light to the whole house (see Matthew 5:15).

How do we exert this kind of influence upon others so that their lives and ours are enriched and blessed? Joseph Smith warned that it is the *nature* and *disposition* of almost all of us to exercise this influence in an unrighteous way. He said:

We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion.

Hence many are called, but few are chosen. [D&C 121:39–40]

Agency and Accountability

Is it possible for us to have the best of motives and intentions and still produce undesirable results? In what ways can we unrighteously dominate the lives of others? Obviously this is a matter of overriding importance, for, not only do we bring others into jeopardy by our misuse of this power, but it appears that our own prospects for eternal advancement are closely related to our leaning to use it righteously.

In order for us to interact with each other in a correct way, it is necessary to comprehend the immense importance of the gift of agency—the freedom to exercise one’s own will. Of course,

one’s agency is of little productive value unless it is accompanied by knowledge and understanding. When knowledge and understanding are combined with agency, a condition is achieved that we call *accountability*.

Achieving accountability and helping others to achieve it are among the most important concerns of mortal life. Parents have this great responsibility with regard to their children. The Lord has said that those parents who fail in this are guilty of a serious transgression (see D&C 68:25). Progress and development toward a celestial standard of life cannot be achieved in the absence of individual accountability. It is a process that continues after baptism. The Lord has said that children only *begin* to become accountable before him at the baptismal age (see D&C 29:47).

Jehovah vs. Satan

It is helpful to review the account given to us by Moses in the Pearl of Great Price of the propositions that were advanced and the decisions made in the great council of spirits prior to the creation and habitation of this earth. In that council the purposes and opportunities of mortal life and the essential nature of agency were explained. The preeminently important role of a redeemer and atoner in this great plan was also outlined. One whom we know as Jehovah, the Firstborn of the Father in the spirit, was chosen to fill this role. He was fully qualified for such an assignment. It would require attributes of unexcelled devotion, love, and perfection. Jehovah accepted the conditions of the plan and willingly agreed to comply with them. Additionally, he insisted that the honor and glory resulting from the success of this plan would remain with the Father (see Moses 4:1–4).

Paramount among the conditions that Jehovah espoused was that of agency—the freedom of each individual spirit to make choices and to abide by the consequences of those choices. All of us who participated in that

council were informed as to the risks that would attach to a mortal existence. We understood well that, while our decision to come into mortal life would enable us to be “added upon” (Abraham 3:26), the prospect of having “glory added upon [our] heads for ever and ever” would be conditioned upon our willing obedience to those principles and practices that would make this possible. We understood that because we would be free to make choices—to exercise our agency—some would fall short of their highest potential in consequence of their disobedience. It must have been a most sobering and compelling moment in our lives. The magnitude of the step to be taken into mortal life must have seemed overwhelming to us—and indeed it was!

At this momentous time of decision-making, another prominent figure stepped forward. We know him as Lucifer, a son of the morning. He contested the plan of the Father, and he opposed the choice of Jehovah as the Redeemer. Taking advantage of the anxiety and doubt that must have been felt by many of the spirits in that council, he used his influence to incite a rebellion. He proposed that he should replace Jehovah as the central figure in the plan of salvation. His plan would deny the freedom of choice to those who followed him. They would be compelled to obedience. He promised them that not one soul of them would be lost. Furthermore, all the honor and glory were to rest upon him. The words of the Father describe these events and their consequences for Lucifer and those who rebelled with him.

Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down;

And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to

lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice. [Moses 4:3–4]

Lucifer knew that the promise of salvation extended on his conditions was a lie. He could not have delivered the results he promised. He had two despicable motives in taking the course he did. One was to make himself an absolute dictator with all power and glory. The other was to enslave his followers by taking from them forever their right to make choices. Obviously under such conditions all opportunity for individual progress and development would have been lost. Lucifer sought to aggrandize himself at the eternal expense of all who would submit to his proposition.

From the account of these dramatic events we gain considerable insight into the importance of Joseph Smith’s inspired observation. No person can be compelled to progress. When compulsion is used, the benefits are lost. It is an irrevocable law. Manipulation, regimentation, coercion—for whatever motive or reason—will ultimately fail to produce good results. Joseph Smith specifically warned against such things as pride, vain ambition, control, unrighteous dominion, compulsion, hypocrisy, and guile. He declared that methods of exerting influence based upon these things would cause the Spirit of the Lord to grieve, the heavens to withdraw their sanction, and, finally, the power for accomplishing good to be terminated (see D&C 121:36–37).

The Prophet went on to say that no power or influence can be maintained, nor should it be attempted, even within the purview of a priesthood calling or assignment, except

by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile. [D&C 121:41–42]

In order for progress and development to occur, then, one must have the freedom to exercise his own will. He must have a knowledge of truth sufficient to make him accountable—enough to “greatly enlarge the soul.” Moreover, he must come to value the truths he has learned for himself, by his own volition, not through compulsion or intimidation from another. Under these conditions he is capable of exercising moral judgment. And he is capable of progress.

I like the statement made by Albert Payne on this point:

A distinguishing feature of church organization lies in its balance of authority and individual rights. Priesthood is a brotherhood, and in its operation the highest capacities of man—his capacity to act as a free agent, and his capacity to be spiritual—must be protected, respected, and enlarged. Leaders invite, persuade, encourage, and recommend in a spirit of gentleness and meekness. Members respond freely as the Spirit guides. Only this kind of response has moral value. Fear and force have no place in the kingdom because they do not produce moral actions, and they are contrary to God’s gift of free agency.
[Unpublished]

It should be pointed out that the Lord’s plan does not ignore the need for occasional correction and discipline. He does not withhold the consequences of bad choices. When we err, we feel the pain. Those in positions of influence and leadership, including parents, are required to see that purity of conduct and belief is maintained among the membership of the Church. Persistent or recurring violation of the Lord’s standard requires disciplinary action. His commitment to agency does not include a tolerance for sin. It is important for us to remember the fact taught by Alma to his son Corianton: Mercy cannot rob justice (see Alma 42:25).

While his love for us does not diminish, he does not rescue us from hard lessons that we

must sometimes learn. Freedom always has jeopardy as its companion. Only inspired wisdom and an unrelenting commitment to truth and righteous conduct guarantee a forward course on the path of progress.

The *freedom to* choose our own course of action does not provide *freedom from* the consequences of our choices.

With these facts before us, how do we govern ourselves in wielding the influence the Lord expects us to have upon others? How can these principles apply in our relationships with family, friends, associates, and with all whom we encounter on life’s journey?

Just as the ends do not always justify the means, neither do the motives always justify the methods. Lucifer sought to aggrandize himself by enslaving others. His motive for compelling others was to exalt himself above them. One may have the purest of motives for regimenting, compelling, or controlling the lives of others, but his motives will not prevent negative results from occurring in the lives of those whom his incorrect methods touch.

The Savior’s Example

We have a perfect model to follow in the Savior himself. He had great power that he could have used to compel people to follow him and to be obedient to his word. Occasionally he demonstrated this power in miraculous ways but never with the intent to command a following. It was not uncommon for him to ask of those who had been the recipients of his marvelous power to keep the matter to themselves and tell no one. Such was the case with the leper whom Jesus healed. “See thou tell no man” (Matthew 8:4) was the Savior’s charge in this case. It was almost as though he feared that men would follow him because of his power rather than as a result of having learned his truths and having valued them because they were true.

In no incident in the mortal ministry of the Lord is this concern made more manifest than

in the case of the feeding of the multitude with the loaves and fishes (see John 6). This great gathering of people had followed Jesus into a mountain where he had taught them. They had brought no provender with them. Out of compassion for their physical hunger, he miraculously provided food for 5,000. Their reaction to this demonstration of power was to attempt to force him to become their king. The benefits of yielding subservience to one who could care for their needs so easily were obvious. Their intentions alarmed the Savior. He left the crowd immediately and during the night crossed over to the other side of the sea of Galilee near Capernaum. Word soon came to them of the Lord's whereabouts, and the throng pursued him. When they found him, they said, "Rabbi, when camest thou hither?" (John 6:25).

Perceiving the real purpose of their interest in him, the Lord accused them:

Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled.

Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life.
[John 6:26–27]

The crowd then demanded another miracle, protesting that they were not so different from the children of Israel for whom Moses had provided manna in the desert.

Obviously the truths that Jesus had taught these people had not penetrated their hearts and their understanding. They were untouched by the influence he hoped to have. "I am the bread of life," he said. "He that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).

This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die.

I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh,

which I will give for the life of the world. [John 6:50–51]

Completely untouched by understanding, the multitude was revulsed by this allegorical attempt of the Savior, and, as the scriptures tell us, "from that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him" (John 6:66).

It would not have been difficult for Jesus to continue to command the following of these people. Their welfare and their salvation meant more to him than his own life. A few more public miracles could have held them and augmented their numbers. It would have been an easy thing for him to do. But the essential parts of the equation were not coming together. He did not wish a following on that basis. It must have been a terribly disappointing, frustrating experience for the Master. If they would not follow him because they believed and valued the truths he taught, he would not have them follow him at all.

From a careful review for the Lord's own methods in teaching and influencing others, it appears that he has always been greatly concerned about helping people to become accountable. His teaching is designed to give both knowledge and understanding. He has set a perfect example. And he has always honored the agency of men. When it has been necessary for him to reprove and correct, he has done so openly and directly, but always with the intent to help and to lift—never to bring honor or attention to himself, nor to bring lock-step, blind obedience to his will. The Lord does not exercise unrighteous dominion.

Implementing the Perfect Plan

Following this pattern, it would seem that we must use every opportunity that comes to us to share the truths we have about life and its purpose. The Lord's charge to Ezekiel that we referred to earlier is evidence of this. Additionally we must continue to encourage

and guide and assist with patience and meekness, not to serve our own needs nor our own objectives, but with an eye single to the glory of the Lord and the blessing of his children.

These are matters that are at the very center of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Father's plan of life for us. There is no other plan capable of producing the character and strength and independent goodness that must qualify one for eternal life. Gospel principles and the institutions of the Church provide the essential road map for us to follow, but the detail of the daily itinerary is left up to us.

The Savior trusts us to succeed because he knows of the divine spark within us, and he trusts the plan because he knows of its perfection. Even as he had to be trusted by the Father to drink of the bitter cup in those last hours of Gethsemane, when he wondered and hoped momentarily that there might be an easier way, so he must trust us. Even as he had to trust Peter and the other apostles to pass the tests of the refiner's fire after he had been taken from their midst, so he must trust us. There is no other way.

When we contrast the vacillating Peter on the night of the Savior's betrayal (see Luke 22:60–62) and his humiliation before Pilate to Peter, the calmly unshakable apostle who later stood before the Jewish council and at the peril of his life witnessed for the divine messiahship of the Master, we too can know that the plan works (see Acts 4:10–12). It is valid, it is true, it is perfect.

In order for it to work its miracle for us, we must go beyond that which is prescribed for us. We must do many good things of our own free will because the power is in us wherein we are agents unto ourselves (see D&C 58:26–28).

The challenges through which we must pass in making the necessary preparations for the Lord's return will require that we develop the tempered integrity of Peter and Paul and Joseph. It is an integrity that cannot be imposed upon us. It is a strength that must be

born and nurtured within each soul. It is the power of God unto salvation through Jesus Christ. We may teach and encourage and love and correct one another to achieve it, but we cannot compel.

The elders quorum president who takes it upon himself to do all of the unfinished home teaching in his quorum during the last week of the month must ask himself what his real motives are. Is it for the sake of a good record? And, if so, for what reasons does he wish to make the record look good? Is he concerned about helping his home teachers to be accountable? Is he willing to let them be accountable whether or not the teaching is done? These are challenging questions, and they require soul-searching, honest answers. When we delegate a responsibility to others, we establish a sacred trust. We have an obligation to do everything appropriate that we can do to help them succeed, but we must be careful not to preempt them in the responsibility we have delegated lest we rob them of their rightful opportunity and in so doing exercise unrighteous dominion.

The ward mission leader who prescribes the exact procedure to be followed by all members of his ward in fulfilling their member-missionary responsibility must carefully assess both his motive and his method. Certainly he must do all he can to teach the purpose and the need for the missionary effort. He must share ideas and encourage at every opportunity. But he must guard against the temptation to regiment in order to get the results he has specified. At what point is agency infringed upon and unrighteous dominion exercised?

As a high school basketball coach, I learned the value of what we used to call our "freelance" offense. There were times when all the practiced patterns and set plays didn't produce the desired results. At these times the freelance offense was often effective. It simply consisted of having each player take advantage of every opportunity that arose, with a minimum of

form and system. It required a considerable command of the fundamentals and a keen sensitivity to the situation. Sometimes a good freelance offense will win for you when the system fails, especially if the fundamentals are understood and applied.

In order for people to keep the Sabbath Day holy, must they have a full day of required activities prescribed for them at our chapels, or can they enjoy the necessary group worship exercises, including partaking of the sacrament, and then be trusted to govern their own conduct and find their own means of spiritual uplift on this sacred day? Can we live with the risk that some will misuse their time and opportunity? Can agency be honored in such an important matter as this?

Can parents be entrusted to teach the gospel to their own children? Or must we require all to follow intensive group programs for instructing our young people to protect against the possibility that some parents will be negligent and their children cheated of their rightful opportunity? Are there reasonable answers to these important questions in the pattern the Lord has set for us? Where can the most appropriate balance be found in order to bring the greatest ultimate blessings for all of us?

In our consideration of these vital and very real issues, we must never tune out the warning sounded for us by the Prophet Joseph Smith: "It is the nature and disposition of almost all men . . . to exercise unrighteous

dominion." We must remember the terrible price that has been paid in order that our agency and accountability might be preserved and enhanced. Finally, we cannot lose from our minds the picture of the Savior's heartache and disappointment as the multitude at Capernaum turned away "and walked no more with him." Another miracle could probably have held them on—another meal of the loaves and fishes. They were so precious to him. One can sense the heart-wrenching disappointment of the Savior as he turned to his apostles and asked, "Will ye also go away?" (John 6:67).

Peter's response has meaning for us all: "Lord," he said, "to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

The words of eternal life, while full of transcendent hope and promise, are not easy. The pathway of progress marked by the Lord is filled with challenges and risks, but it is the only way to celestial life. As we move along that path, we have the reassurance of knowing that we follow in the footsteps of one who knows the way, who understands, who trusts us to press on by our own effort and will. He has removed from this path every obstacle that we could not remove ourselves. He now beckons, "Come to me."

On our onward journey, may we draw proper strength and help from each other, and may we be so wise as to avoid any act or desire that would unnecessarily hedge up the way for another. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.