

Why We Must Be Wholeheartedly Holy

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It is good to be with you this morning. While in a moment I will draw on the academic disciplines of Egyptology and biblical studies, in which I have been so steeped over the last few decades, I want to start out by trying to draw an analogy from one of my favorite things to do: waterskiing. The way I read the accounts of the Savior and Peter on the Sea of Galilee, it seems to me that waterskiing is the closest thing we have to a celestial sport. I can't get enough of it. In fact, one year my brothers, a cousin, and I made the goal of skiing on Utah Lake every month of the year. During January and February we questioned the wisdom of this goal, but we did it. I skied every time I got the chance.

During all these years of waterskiing I have had the chance to teach a lot of people how to ski. I believe I taught around 100 people. As I did so, I realized that there are really only three things people have to do to learn how to ski. The first is to keep their skis together. Often the pressure of the water will cause a person to do the splits, and it is very hard to ski that way. But there are ways to tie skis together, so this isn't the biggest problem.

The most difficult problem comes because you have an instinctive tendency to try to stand on top of the water as the boat pulls

you. As a result, just as the boat pulls people up, most of them pull on the rope and push with their legs. Instead of being helpful, both of these actions tend to pull people's legs out from under them, and they immediately fall. Most of the time the action of pulling on the rope was so instinctive that people didn't even realize they had done it. I can't tell you how many times I repeated the mantra "arms straight, knees bent, skis together." I would explain again and again that the boat was strong enough to pull a person up—they just had to be patient enough to let it.

Here is the lesson: When those I taught learned to forget about using their own strength to get up and relied on the power of the boat, they would ski. When you master your impulse to pull yourself up, you get on top of the water; then the ability to accelerate, cut through the water, float on a sea of glass, and sail with an amazing feeling of freedom and exhilaration is waiting for you.

While this analogy can be applied in a number of ways, today I want to compare it

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to something I have seen that ancient Israel struggled with. During the two decades I have been teaching the Old Testament, I have found that for most of us it just seems weird when we read about ancient Israel's struggles with idolatry. We cannot imagine why they would stop worshipping Jehovah and instead worship things carved from wood or stone or molded from metal. We ask ourselves, "What were they thinking? What is wrong with them?" Yet I have found that we should never ask ourselves, "What is wrong with them?" Instead we should ask, "What is wrong with them and me?" If ancient Israel struggled with something, surely we struggle with it as well. We should not ask ourselves *if* we struggle with the things that tempted them; rather, we should ask *how* we do the same thing.

I have also found that we can more easily answer this question when we come to a more accurate view of exactly what ancient Israel was struggling with. I believe we are wrong when we think they stopped worshipping Jehovah and started worshipping other gods. While some did stop worshipping God, most kept worshipping Him—they just added the worship of other gods. They worshipped Jehovah and Asherah or Jehovah and Anat, Ba'al, Chemosh, Molech, and so on.

The problem is that everyone around them was doing this. Their neighbors had gods that they focused on, but they were also willing to adopt new gods as they encountered them. As Israel drank in the culture around them, it seemed only natural to keep worshipping Jehovah but also to worship the things their neighbors worshipped. Most likely many of them felt just fine about doing this because they continued to feel quite devout toward Jehovah. It is this attempt to worship more than one god at the same time that Elijah addressed on Mount Carmel when he challenged the priests of Ba'al. During that contest he thundered out to Israel: "How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God,

follow him: but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21).

The word *halt* here does not mean "stop," as we usually think it does. It is used in this scripture in the same way that it is used in the New Testament: to mean that someone is lame or unable to walk. Perhaps a better translation would be "How long limp ye between two opinions?" Elijah was not asking them why they couldn't choose which god to worship but rather was pointing out that they could not really go anywhere as long as they were trying to worship both gods. In effect, by relying on something in addition to Jehovah, they were pulling their legs out from under themselves just as are those who are trying to learn to waterski but who rely on their own strength as well as the boat's.

Now that we know ancient Israel was worshipping both the true God and false gods at the same time, our task is, as I said earlier, not to ask ourselves *if* but instead *how* we do the same thing. I believe there is no doubt that we all worship more than one god. For some of us, instead of worshipping both Jehovah and Ba'al, we worship Jehovah and footba'al. For others it is video games, material possessions, or a whole host of other things. Yet over the last twenty years, as I have tried to observe the ways in which we struggle with idolatry, I have become convinced that on the whole we struggle with one kind of false god more than any other. We tend to worship the ideas of the world, and, like those who pull on the waterski rope, we don't even realize we are doing it.

The problem is that the world has been shouting its ideas at us loudly and incessantly from the time we were very small. We encounter these ideas in our schools, from kindergarten through college. We are inundated with them as we read newspapers, watch TV and movies, or listen to the radio—and in a hundred other ways. Many of the concepts we encounter are harmless enough, but most of the time we are not very careful in sifting

through the ideas we hear, and I am certain we have all swallowed a lot of fallacious and dangerous ideas without even realizing it. As President Thomas S. Monson said at the rededication of the Boise Idaho Temple, you “walk in a world saturated with the sophistries of Satan” (“Boise Idaho Temple: ‘Again Hallowed,’” *Church News*, 24 November 2012, ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/62997/Boise-Idaho-Temple-Again-hallowed.html#).

Sadly, Satan’s ideas are so prevalent and often so subtly, consistently, and insidiously conveyed that we usually are not aware we have adopted them. We drink so heavily from the well of the world’s influence that such influence can become part of the fabric of who we are without our even realizing it. And so we keep pulling on that waterski rope and wondering why our spiritual legs keep going out from under us.

Of late, several of our leaders have spoken of the danger of trying to simultaneously worship the worldly god of tolerance and follow the true God’s teachings of right and wrong (see Dallin H. Oaks, “No Other Gods,” *Ensign*, November 2013). Perhaps I can add an illustration from my own classes. Back when I regularly taught world civilization courses, we would discuss the cultures found in ancient Mesoamerica. A small part of our time was spent discussing the violent rituals of human sacrifice that the Spanish conquistadors encountered there. As I tried to frame a discussion about these violent acts and their effect on cultural interaction, I often asked my students what they thought about the horrific rituals we were discussing. I found that if I asked about the ritual practice, it was quickly condemned. But if I phrased the question in terms of what my students thought about this element of ancient culture, I was lucky if even one student would speak negatively of it. My students had been taught so regularly and thoroughly that we must be tolerant of other people’s cultures that they could not bring themselves

to say that human or child sacrifice was a bad element of culture.

Now, I believe the Bible is fairly clear on this point. A number of passages make it very plain that God finds this practice completely unacceptable. Yet too often my students could not quite commit to this gospel truth because it conflicted with the ideas of the world that they have been immersed in since their youth. Without realizing it, they had begun to struggle with trying to worship God *and* the ideas of the world at the same time. If they had a hard time condemning human sacrifice, I can only imagine what else the world had convinced them that they should not call wrong. The ways of the world were surely affecting their ability to fully see things the way God wanted them to. Insightfully, President Boyd K. Packer warned that the virtue of tolerance could become a vice in just this way (see “Covenants,” *Ensign*, November 1990).

I wish to make sure I am not misunderstood. In its place, tolerance is a wonderful virtue. I am not preaching intolerance. But for it to be a virtue, tolerance must be felt and practiced in God’s way, not the world’s way. When we try to practice godly virtues in the way the world wants us to, then we are halting between two opinions—we are doing our own version of worshipping Jehovah and Ba’al at the same time. Of course, adopting the worldly version of tolerance isn’t the only way we do this. In many ways each of us falls for even more subtle idols of worldly influenced thinking.

Often the most subtle false-idea gods start out as something good. Ancient Israel struggled with this too. For instance, in biblical times it became a practice in many places to set up a stone that would remind people of God. This practice probably started out with harmless intents. God even commanded Israel to set up stones taken from the Jordan River to remind them of how He had parted the river for them as they entered the promised land. The stones were not carved, so they

were not “graven images,” and it *is* actually a good thing to have something that helps you think of God more often. Stones that were designed to remind the Israelites of God were called *matsebot* in Hebrew. The problem with *matsebot* is that they didn’t just remain stones that reminded a person of God. Over time they became objects of adoration. They slowly shifted into a kind of idol. My guess is that our Israelite ancestors didn’t recognize that they had made the change; the idolatrous shift in their hearts went unnoticed.

And so we again have to ask ourselves not *if* but *how* we do this same thing. How do we start out with good intents and yet let ourselves be influenced by the ideas of the world in such a way that soon good things become idols? I am sure that we do this in too many ways to count, but let me talk about a few of the more common ways.

In our church we value hard work. We value doing well. We value taking care of our families and contributing to the community. The characteristics we try to develop often help us to be very good at these things. Typically we start out wanting to do well at our jobs, to do well at school, to do good things in the community, to learn to play the piano or sing, and so on—all because we see these accomplishments as things that will help us build the kingdom of God. But the world sees these accomplishments as markers of success in and of themselves, not as ends to the means of furthering the cause of Zion. Sadly we fall into that trap so easily. As the world lauds these accomplishments, it usually does not take long until we start to use worldly standards and measure success by how well we do at work or by what kinds of degrees we have or by how much recognition we get from others for the things we do or the talents we have developed.

The problem is not in doing well at any of these things; the problem is when we believe the world that this is how we measure success. While all of these things are worthwhile in

some ways, I doubt very much that this is how God measures success. In fact, the Savior said, “That which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15). Yet it is so easy for God’s voice to be overpowered by or, at the very least, strongly mingled with and diluted by the voice of the world. And when we start to let the world define prestige or success for us, then we have erected *matsebot* in our lives and we have pulled our legs out from under ourselves.

Let me provide an even more concrete or detailed example of how this might happen. Clearly the most important endeavor you will undertake in this life will be within the walls of your own home. Much of what you will spend the rest of your life doing will center around your family. You will try to earn money to support a family. You will be involved in schools and community groups, perhaps even in politics and social movements, all in an effort to take care of your family and create an ideal environment for them. At the same time, many of these things will bring the praise of the world. But the world does not value these efforts for the same reasons God does. Without great care, eventually the praise of the world will cause us to adopt the world’s values. We begin to do these things both to help our family *and* to garner the acceptance of the world. We try to serve two masters, or limp between two opinions.

As we pursue this course, and to some degree we all do, times will arise that will force us to make choices. Do we spend a little more time away from family to find success at work, in the PTA, on mommy blogs, in a reading club, on the golf course, and so on (fill in the blank here for what you spend time doing)? All of these things can be very good, and, in fact, the outward actions of someone who is single-mindedly serving God may look exactly the same as the actions of someone who is believing both God’s and the world’s ideas. What we must ask ourselves is if we

are doing what we do because of the world's values as much as because of God's.

Sadly, when we have begun to savor the values of the world, we are in a no-win situation. If we choose time away from family in order to pursue the praise of the world, we will have lost. Yet if we make the right decision while still holding to at least some of the values of the world, we will deprive ourselves of some of the joy and progress that would normally follow making the right choice. We will find ourselves feeling conflicted, slightly hollow, and not as satisfied as we could and should be. Our idolatry will have robbed us, and our spiritual progress will be stunted in comparison to what it could be—all because we are limping along following both God's and the world's ideas. We will question our abilities and worth because the world will be telling us we are worth less, and we partially believe them. While they are not alone in this, often stay-at-home moms in particular struggle with this because the world is very, very anxious to tell them that they are not spending as much time as they should on the things the world values. To the degree that we accept the world's way of setting values and priorities, we will lose out on the ability to find contentment and satisfaction in doing the things of God for godly reasons. In some way this will be true of all of us, regardless of vocation or how we spend our time. Even our understanding of gospel principles can be affected when we are heavily influenced by the world's values and priorities.

The Savior warned us about this repeatedly. For example, he berated Peter for savoring “not the things that be of God, but those that be of men” (Matthew 16:23). He also warned that even those who had received and nourished the word could have the gospel choked out by the “cares and riches and pleasures of this life” (Luke 8:14).

Even with these warnings it seems we continue to allow ourselves to be influenced by the world. I have not done a scientific study

of this, but my impression is that Latter-day Saints tend to follow the trends of the world around them, lagging just a little behind. The rates of successful marriages, family sizes, the immodesty of our clothing, and the crudeness of our entertainment usually follow the trends of the world—we just stay slightly better. We kid ourselves that we are being holy because our shorts or skirts are not as short as everyone else's and our topics of conversation are not as crude as those of the world around us. But the reality is that if our standards are so constantly affected by the world's, it does not matter if we are doing better than everyone else; the world is still setting our standards instead of God.

I have noticed that in areas of the country or the world where issues such as same-sex marriage, gender leadership equality, family size, and other social matters are all the rage, our members tend to struggle more with these issues. While awareness of such issues is important and helpful and while listening to others' ideas can help us to seek further direction from God, we must also be careful that we are neither blinded by the mists of Satan's sophistries nor so afraid of those mocking from the great and spacious building that we let our opinions be set by others rather than by the true doctrines of God, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks warned us two years ago in general conference (see “No Other Gods”). So much of how we think about these issues is set by those in Hollywood, those who write songs, those who sit behind news desks, those who stand in front of the chalkboard, those who speak in the halls of Congress, or those who write columns and blogs. We often do not realize how much these things have affected our thinking and the way we view the world. We should be extremely wary of these worldly sources, for God's ways are higher than their ways and His thoughts are higher than their thoughts (see Isaiah 55:9). Too many of those of the world are those that Nephi warned would “revile against that which is good, and say that

it is of no worth!" (2 Nephi 28:16). When we allow such people to influence our thinking even a little, we will find ourselves feeling an internal conflict as we try to reconcile the part of us that believes what God has told us with the part of us that has started to savor the ideas of the world without our notice.

As we hobble along by following both the ideas of God and the world, the conflict between these competing ideas will sooner or later create some kind of crisis, for listening to the world is akin to pulling on the waterski rope of life, and the only possible result is that we will fall flat on our backs. Sometimes these crises come in the shape of not feeling sure what we should do with our lives. Sometimes they come at the cost of our self-esteem, and other times they create a cost that our families, ward members, and others must pay. Most often *all* of these things happen. Sometimes the conflict causes a crisis of faith. This is unsurprising. The ways of the world are in direct conflict with faith, so the messages of the world are sometimes subtly, and sometimes overtly, antireligious. When we harbor the cancerous ideas of the world, they will eventually attack and kill the pure cells of faith that make up our spiritual body. When this happens, we may be able to live with the cancer for a while, but sooner or later there will be only two options: either the tumors of worldly thinking will kill our spiritual lives or we will have to cut the cancer out.

Sometimes these crises arise over social issues. We should expect this. Even if those who live in the great and spacious building have good intents and are acting the best they can according to the knowledge they have, we must be aware that they have made a full-time vocation out of mocking those who hold to the rod and partake of the fruit of the tree of life. Thus we can expect that when we cling to God's way of thinking, there will be many who try to make us feel stupid for doing so. When we stand up for truths such as morality,

marriage, revelation, prophets, priesthood, and the inspiration of scripture, there will be those who do their very best to make us feel parochial, backward, uncultured, unthinking, unsophisticated, and foolish. These scoffers are very good at what they do and, ironically, somehow find a way to sound as if *they* are on the moral high ground. The inhabitants of the great and spacious building greatly outnumber us and can make it seem like we are so silly and alone in our way of thinking. As a result, we often adjust our thinking in order to align ourselves with these seeming sophisticates. At other times we just remain quiet, hoping no one will notice our faithful viewpoint. Either way, we get lost in the mists of darkness as we loosen our grip on the iron rod.

At other times these crises arise over historical or doctrinal issues. This also should not surprise us. As we have said before, God's ways of thinking are higher than ours, and thus we should not be surprised when we don't understand everything He has said or done. I have spent my adult lifetime studying the translation of the book of Abraham. Some have experienced a kind of crisis over what the world has to say about Joseph Smith's abilities to translate and how that relates to the book of Abraham. While we will not go into detail here today, I can tell you that careful study and research have provided very strong and well-supported answers for all of the major questions those in the great and spacious building have thrown at us. Note that I said all of the *major* questions, but I did not say *every* question. There are still questions about the translation of the book of Abraham for which we have no answers. In fact, I have sat down numerous times and tried to come up with theories or hypotheses that could account for all the facts we have at our disposal. I have tried to propose theories from a nonbelieving perspective and from a believing perspective. I believe that the nonbelieving theories have far more holes in them, but in truth, nothing I have thought

of can account for all the data we have, and in some ways this is very comforting to me.

If we think about it, wouldn't we be surprised if we *could* understand exactly how God works when He helps a prophet with an inspired translation? Frankly, given my current limited and finite mind, I would be a bit disappointed if I was capable of understanding just how God works. That would imply that God's state isn't really that far advanced from mine. In fact, it would be a fair bit of pride for any of us to think that we can understand all the whats and whys of God's historical dealings with His people, prophets, and scriptures. Let me say again, His thoughts are higher than ours. Trusting in His ideas is like allowing the boat to pull you out of the water, and amazing things are in store for those who do.

But to the world, trusting in something we cannot fully understand is laughable, so they point their fingers and mock while standing in a great and spacious building that has no foundation and is destined to fall, which will put all of its inhabitants flat on their backs like so many of those I was teaching to ski. Still, as they mock, many others who are holding to the rod will loosen their grip, get lost in the mists of darkness, and limp along between two opinions. Yet those who have tasted the goodness of the fruit can remain strong, even when they don't fully understand everything. Even when they aren't eating the fruit at the moment, their memory of how delicious the fruit tasted or of how they felt when they had the Spirit with them can be enough to help them withstand the ideas and the mocking of the world.

None of this is to imply that we cannot learn things of value from the world around us. In fact, we are commanded to learn wisdom from the best ideas and books available (see D&C 88:118). But we must learn to sift these ideas through the gospel rather than sift the gospel through these ideas. Our values and priorities must be derived from God or we will

eventually abandon them and journey toward the great and spacious building.

You see, we must be what God calls a "peculiar" or a "holy" people. At its most basic root, the word *holy* means to be set aside or to be different than everything else. To use President Kevin J. Worthen's phrase, we must "be etherealized" ("Enlightened, Uplifted, and Changed," BYU inauguration devotional address, 9 September 2014). If we are truly going to be holy, we will have to overcome our desire to fit in and think like everyone else and instead relish the idea of thinking more like God and less like this world. That is why God commands His Latter-day Saints to "go ye out from Babylon" (D&C 133:5). Leaving intellectual Babylon and becoming holy, etherealized, or peculiar will cause us to be like Enoch's people, who "confessed they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (D&C 45:13). In other words, many of the ways you think and feel now will eventually come to feel foreign to your higher, holier way of thinking.

Knowing all of this, we must ask ourselves what we should do about it. While all of us must do these things, I will phrase them in terms of what *you* must do, for I want each of you individually to think of how these things apply specifically to you. Let me suggest five things you must do if you are to avoid limping between two opinions and pulling your legs out from under yourself.

First, you must conclude, as Elder Oaks once said, "that followers of Christ [must] think differently than others" ("As He Thinketh in His Heart," Church Educational System Evening with a General Authority devotional, 8 February 2013). You must determine that you want to follow God's way of thinking more than the world's way.

Second, you must honestly ask yourself what worldly influenced ideas you are clinging to and then do everything you can to eradicate those ideas from your system. You will periodically have to engage in regular good and

hard self-examination throughout your life, especially in times of crisis.

Third, you will not be able to successfully identify the ways in which your thoughts are inspired by worldly gods rather than by the one true God without God's help. Thus you must do all you can to have the Spirit with you as you engage in introspection *and* whenever you encounter new ideas. After all, it is only the Spirit that can make you holy or that can cause you to think and see as God does rather than as the world does. In other words, you must be etherealized. Left to your own fallen devices, you can only think and see from the world's fallen perspective. You will need the help of God to see things as He would have you see them.

Fourth, after having done this, you will have to do all you can to have the Spirit with you regularly so that you can maintain a holy perspective rather than give in to the ever-encroaching ideas of the world. We all know those things that we must do to have the Spirit with us. Despite your busy schedules, you must never take a break from engaging in activities that invite the Spirit into your lives. Because it is so important to engender a regular relationship with the Holy Ghost while you are here at BYU, let me echo Elder M. Russell Ballard's counsel from general conference just last month: "If you are attending a Church school, consistently include a class

each semester in religious education" ("The Greatest Generation of Young Adults," *Ensign*, May 2015). Another reason you must have the Spirit with you is that your decision to serve God will not be enough. Only the Holy Ghost carrying the power of the Atonement into your soul will truly root out worldly ideas from you.

Fifth, when you are struggling because the way you are thinking or feeling at the moment seems to conflict with how God would have you think or feel, remember the times you have felt the Spirit in the past. We will not feel the Spirit at all times, and sometimes just when we are not, the mocking fingers of the world will hurt—and hurt deeply. But at those moments we must remember that we *have* felt God teach and testify to us of the eternal truth and import of His ideas, and then we must hold fast to those ideas just as we did when we felt His testifying Spirit. If we do, He will continue to sanctify us, or make us more holy. With His help, eventually we will become the kinds of beings who are capable of thinking and feeling just as He does. We will be holy beings, and the doctrines of the priesthood will distill upon our souls as the dews of heaven, and our everlasting dominion will flow unto us without compulsory means forever and ever (see D&C 121:45–46).

It is my prayer that this will happen for all of us, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.