

To Act in Holiness Before the Lord

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A number of years ago I taught evening classes for the University of Utah at the old Stoker School in Bountiful. One winter night I walked outside after class and found myself in the middle of a heavy snowfall. As I trudged to my black Subaru station wagon, arms full of class materials, I discovered the lock on my door was frozen. After numerous failed attempts, I moved to the passenger door, only to experience the same result. The best idea I could muster under the circumstances was to heat the locks—hence my professional pursuit of health and not engineering. I walked to the nearby house of some friends and borrowed a candle and some matches. To my dismay, this effort failed as well. Though I could insert the key, I could not coax it sideways.

By now the night was growing late, and I was becoming increasingly cold and tired. Most of the other cars were gone, and I found myself nearly alone in the parking lot. As I stood there, something interesting caught my eye. A few rows over from the car I was so ingeniously trying to enter was *my* black Subaru station wagon. After seeing my car, I was relieved on three counts: I could now drive home, there was no damage done to the other Subaru, and the owner hadn't shown up while I was attempting to torch his lock.

This experience has long served as a personal reminder that in this life we can be drawn to things that squander our time, energy, and light without moving us toward a meaningful end. Still, the way home is straight and narrow, and it is vital to know the difference between something that helps us return and something that deflects or restrains our progress. Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

Someday, when we look back on mortality, we will see that so many of the things that seemed to matter so much at the moment will be seen not to have mattered at all. And the eternal things will be seen to have mattered even more than the most faithful of the Saints imagined. [Neal A. Maxwell, *Even As I Am* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 104]

Over the last few years I have become increasingly interested in a verse of scripture I believe may be one of the eternal things referred to by Elder Maxwell. It has helped define my path and purpose and direction home. In the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord declared:

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And thus ye shall become instructed in the law of my church, and be sanctified by that which ye have received, and ye shall bind yourselves to act in all holiness before me. [D&C 43:9]

Our personal holiness appears to be important to the Lord. In sections 20 and 21 of the Doctrine and Covenants we are also commanded to walk in holiness (see D&C 20:69 and 21:4). In section 87 we are commanded to stand in holy places (see verse 8).

As we receive saving gospel ordinances and make and keep covenants, our hope in the Savior is that someday we will be sanctified, or made holy. Elder M. Russell Ballard taught:

*We seek to have our lives sanctified, purified, and cleansed to the point where we can be found worthy to walk into the presence of our heavenly parents and Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Redeemer. [M. Russell Ballard, *When Thou Art Converted: Continuing Our Search for Happiness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 27]*

Though sanctification requires our diligence, it is made possible only through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. This may seem daunting or distant, but acting in holiness now will help lead us to our eventual sanctification.

In a recent general conference, President James E. Faust explained that holiness, in part, “is achieved by conforming to God’s will” (“Standing in Holy Places,” *Ensign*, May 2005, 62). To conform is to be in agreement or harmony and to be obedient or compliant. This suggests that to act in holiness, or to conform as expected, a person turns his or her heart and life over to the Lord and is willing to do whatever is asked regardless of the circumstances. Fittingly, Elder Quentin L. Cook taught that holiness “is exemplified by consecration and sacrifice” (Quentin L. Cook, “Are You a Saint?” *Ensign*, November 2003, 96). Finally, in his *Doctrine and Covenants Encyclopedia*, Hoyt Brewster stated, “One who walks in holiness

walks in concert with Christ and has the companionship of the Spirit. One who walks in holiness eschews anything that is sordid and sinful” (Hoyt W. Brewster, Jr., *Doctrine and Covenants Encyclopedia* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988], s.v. “holiness,” 246).

So it appears to me that to act in holiness is to conform ourselves to the Lord’s will as directed by the Holy Ghost. This implies we have turned away from the world and have become pure to the extent we are worthy to be led by the Spirit. This process seems to be reflected in D&C 46:7: “And that which the Spirit testifies unto you even so I would that ye should do in all holiness of heart, walking uprightly before me, considering the end of your salvation.”

The challenge in addressing a topic like holiness is to avoid communicating a holier-than-thou attitude or giving the impression I am further along the path than is really the case. When Albert Einstein arrived at Princeton in 1935, he was asked what supplies he would need for his work. He replied, “A desk, some pads and a pencil, and a large wastebasket—to hold all of my mistakes.”

My family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances know too well that I have much work ahead in my personal quest for holiness. To them I express gratitude for patience, kindness, and forgiveness. But despite our unique challenges, our struggles with sin, and real or imagined inadequacies, our opportunity to act in holiness before the Lord is His invitation to separate ourselves from the world, to be worthy of the Spirit, and to consecrate ourselves to His will and to His cause.

During my service as a bishop I had the opportunity of conducting tithing settlement. It was always a highlight to visit with the members of the ward during the Christmas season. With permission, I share one such experience.

One Sunday afternoon a faithful family came to the office to make their declarations. A sidenote to this story is that the father, an

honorable and well-educated man, had lost his employment months earlier due to no fault of his own. Severance pay and savings eventually wore thin, and the family was doing its best to make ends meet. Earlier in the day my counselors had invited both the Relief Society sisters and priesthood brethren to consider contributing to a Christmas fund we had established to help some of our ward members. After returning home from church, the good mother, undoubtedly influenced by the Spirit, told her children about our request and encouraged them to contribute.

The parents had a few dollars remaining in their modest budget and decided to donate them to the fund. The oldest daughter—a devout and sensitive 17-year-old who had previously helped make a monthly payment for her brother’s mission—brought what money she had available from her part-time job. The youngest daughter, a sweet and conscientious 13-year-old, brought her babysitting money. With emotion in his eyes and obvious love and appreciation for his family, the father handed over their collective contribution. Then all family members declared themselves full-tithe payers.

In retrospect, I was witness to an act of holiness. This family is an example of what it means to be sensitive to—and then to comply with—the promptings of the Holy Ghost. The spirit I felt in that office was nearly overwhelming. Is there anything more desirable than the spirit we feel at those moments in life when we act in accordance with the Lord’s will? For this reason alone we should be in perpetual motion toward holiness.

The blessings associated with acting in holiness cannot be overstated. Acting in holiness allows us to simultaneously worship our Father in Heaven while developing the divine attributes of the Savior. In turn we enjoy the companionship of the Holy Ghost and feel a measure of joy that cannot be found in any worldly pursuit. Acting in holiness is a conduit

for joy. Indeed, the path of holiness is the path of happiness. To act in holiness ultimately fulfills the measure of our creation in leading us to the Savior and to our justification and sanctification.

Embracing the prospect of holiness is important for all of us. After all, the celestial kingdom will be filled with holy people. People who act in holiness radiate light and are an example to those around them. We are drawn to these people because of the inspiration and strength they provide. In the words of C. S. Lewis: “How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing . . . it is irresistible” (C. S. Lewis, *Letters to an American Lady*, ed. Clyde S. Kilby [Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967], 19).

With a desire to elevate our commitment to act in holiness and feel the sustaining spirit and strength of such actions, I respectfully offer three suggestions for our individual and collective pursuits.

First, consider the possibility of consciously elevating holiness as a daily priority. In the College of Health and Human Performance we have been reading and discussing the book *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. Collins attributes the success of companies that have gone from good to great, in part, to what he calls adherence to the hedgehog concept.

Citing Isaiah Berlin, Collins states:

“The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing” [Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1993), 1; quoting the Greek poet Archilocus]. . . . *Day in and day out, the fox circles around the hedgehog’s den, waiting for the perfect moment to pounce. Fast, sleek, beautiful, fleet of foot, and crafty—the fox looks like the sure winner. The hedgehog, on the other hand, is a dowdier creature, looking like a genetic mix-up between a porcupine and a small armadillo. . . .*

The fox waits in cunning silence at the juncture in the trail. The hedgehog, minding his own business, wanders right into the path of the fox. . . . [The fox] leaps out, bounding across the ground, lightning fast. . . . Rolling up into a perfect little ball, the hedgehog becomes a sphere of sharp spikes, pointing outward in all directions. The fox, bounding toward his prey, sees the hedgehog defense and calls off the attack. . . . Each day, some version of this battle between the hedgehog and the fox takes place, and despite the greater cunning of the fox, the hedgehog always wins.

*. . . Foxes pursue many ends at the same time and see the world in all its complexity . . . , never integrating their thinking into one overall concept or unifying vision. Hedgehogs, on the other hand, simplify a complex world into a single organizing idea, a basic principle or concept that unifies and guides everything. . . . For a hedgehog, anything that does not somehow relate to the hedgehog idea holds no relevance. [Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 90–91]*

If we are to act in holiness in a way that is consistent enough for the Lord's service and our own good, we will likely need to apply a hedgehog-type mentality to our daily routine. To the extent possible, acting in holiness needs to become a deliberate daily focus that guides our thinking and behavior. I am not suggesting that we attempt to will ourselves to holiness independent of the Lord. As stated in a visiting teaching message years ago:

*[Holiness] requires continuing, consecrated effort and is achieved one thought and one act at a time. It requires a faith in Christ so pervasive that our lives begin to reflect his. ["The Visiting Teacher: 'More Blessed and Holy,'" *Ensign*, December 1995, 65]*

If I am serious about acting in holiness, I will rely upon the enabling power of the Atonement to strive for purity, then be wise

enough and strong enough to choose the right and resist anything that is inconsistent with the Lord's will. When I fall short, holiness dictates that I rely on the redeeming power of the Atonement and repent responsively and appropriately.

Acting in holiness requires vigilance, so as not to be distracted by the cares of the world. According to Elder M. Russell Ballard:

*Our main goal should be to seek "immortality and eternal life" (Moses 1:39). With this as our goal, why not eliminate from our lives the things that clamor for and consume our thoughts, feelings, and energies without contributing to our reaching that goal? [M. Russell Ballard, "Keeping Life's Demands in Balance," *Ensign*, May 1987, 16]*

Second, something that may help us act in holiness is found in Doctrine and Covenants 38:24, where the Lord stated: "And let every man esteem his brother as himself, and practi[c]e virtue and holiness before me." I believe the word *practice* as used in this verse describes the Lord's expectation that we perform or carry out holiness. However, the idea of practicing holiness as we would practice playing the piano or practice a golf swing is intriguing to me.

You've probably heard about the tourist in New York City who approached a native on the street and asked, "Can you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?"

The New Yorker replied, "Practice, man. Practice, practice, practice."

I recently read an article by Alan Medinger, who addressed this idea of practicing holiness (see Alan Medinger, "Practicing Holiness," *Regeneration News*, January 2004). My thoughts are influenced by his work. The idea of practice—or doing something positive rather than avoiding something negative—is a liberating concept. For example, if you have a problem criticizing others, don't wait until you're enticed to criticize. Rather, look for

opportunities to practice holiness by being more fair and open-minded with people. Practice defending the integrity of people in a genuine way. If dishonesty is a challenge for you, don't wait until you're tempted to be deceitful. Practice acting in holiness by telling the truth in all circumstances.

To practice implies we are active in a process of improving something of personal value. It is a bit like the inoculation theory in my discipline of health education. We train people to practice positive life choices in safe settings so that when they are confronted with challenges in difficult real-life settings, they are more confident in their ability. Acting from a position of strength rather than from a position of weakness allows us to emulate the Savior instead of waiting tentatively for the next bout of temptation and struggle with sin. In this sense we are proactive in turning away from the world and establishing our personal purity.

At the age of 95, cellist Pablo Casals was asked why he was still practicing six hours a day. His response was, "Because I think I'm still improving."

Michael Jordan said it this way:

*I approached practices the same way I approached games. You can't turn it on and off like a faucet. I couldn't dog it during practice and then, when I needed that extra push late in the game, expect it to be there. But that's how a lot of people approach things. And that's why a lot of people fail. They sound like they're committed to being the best they can be. They say all the right things, make all the proper appearances. But when it comes right down to it, they're looking for reasons instead of answers. [In *A 3rd Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul*, comp. Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen (Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, 1996), 246]*

To practice holiness implies we are moving in the right direction. Still, it will probably be a work in progress for most of us. There will

be starts and stops—and maybe even some skid marks.

For example, a few weeks ago I slipped away from my office to find something for lunch. As I approached the entrance of a local restaurant, I noticed what appeared to be a mother and her three children entering just ahead of me. One of the little girls stayed behind. Here was this cute little three- or four-year-old in pigtails using all of her strength to keep the door open for me. I was impressed with this act of kindness and self-sacrifice and thanked her appropriately. I quickly ordered my food and sat down at a table that happened to be next to this family. The mother brought a large drink to the table and returned to the counter to wait for her food. The same little girl who held the door open for me was seated at the table with her younger brother, who was in a booster seat. The little brother was becoming increasingly upset because he could not reach the drink. His big sister, however, had no trouble reaching the drink and took a long sip that seemed to aggravate the brother even more. His displeasure lasted until the mother finally returned with his food. I found it interesting that, within minutes, this endearing little girl acted so kindly to me but was completely oblivious to the needs of her little brother.

So it is with us. We may act in holiness one moment and struggle with it the next. However, displaying flashes of holiness means we are capable of so much more. Where there is a flicker of light there can be steady radiance. Heber J. Grant often used a quote attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson: "That which we persist in doing becomes easier for us to do; not that the nature of the thing is changed, but that our power to do is increased" (see Grant, *GS*, 355).

We can practice acting in holiness in so many ways—whether we are by ourselves or in the service of others. Reading the scriptures more thoughtfully or offering prayers that are more heartfelt or fasting in a way that is more acceptable to the Lord all represent movements

toward holiness. To the person who may be involved with sin or immobilized by guilt, repenting and moving to the light is an act toward holiness. How we treat others and what we say to them or about them are great practice fields for holiness. Winston Churchill said, “By swallowing evil words unsaid, no one has ever harmed his stomach.” Reaching out to people with more kindness, being respectful of those around us, and learning to love those we home teach and visit teach all represent practice opportunities.

Third, closely related to the idea of practicing holiness, is becoming more mindful of opportunities in our lives to act in holiness. This reminds me of a conversation between Winnie the Pooh and Piglet.

Piglet says, “It would be better not to wait to the last minute, Pooh.”

Pooh responds, “Yes, Piglet, but I never seem to know when the last minute is—there are so many minutes.”

Elder Neal A. Maxwell said: “Moments are the molecules that make up eternity!” (“The Tugs and Pulls of the World,” *Ensign*, November 2000, 37). Elder Maxwell then quoted President Hinckley, who counseled: “It is not so much the major events as the small day-to-day decisions that map the course of our living” (Gordon B. Hinckley, *Caesar, Circus, or Christ?* Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year [26 October 1965], 3).

Music, television, movies, and the Internet—or the collective media so pervasive in our lives—can greatly affect our personal purity. We must be especially careful here. We can live close to the Spirit and comply with the Lord’s will in some things and, in a moment, offend the Spirit in other things because of our personal choices in media. We all have to be conscious of what we are doing throughout our daily lives and measure our activities against the Lord’s standard of holiness, asking ourselves, “Is this activity inviting or offending

the Spirit?” and “What would Jesus have us do in this setting and circumstance?”

We are blessed with moments and decisions every day that represent opportunities to act in holiness—to think and speak and act according to the Lord’s will. President Brigham Young said:

Every moment of my life must be holiness to the Lord, resulting from equity, justice, mercy, and uprightness in all my actions, which is the only course by which I can preserve the Spirit of the Almighty to myself. [JD 9:220]

A fairly recent e-mail from our missionary son reported on a series of incidents related to a family in Uruguay. The mother was not a member, and although the father was baptized at age 11, he had been less active for years. Two boys were in the family: a 14-year-old and a six-year-old. The 14-year-old had been baptized one year earlier. During that year he attended church every week by himself and did not miss a single day of seminary. He constantly looked for ways to share the gospel with his friends. Every Sunday he stayed after church to fulfill his duties as a teacher in the Aaronic Priesthood, cleaning the sacrament table and trays. As a result of his faithfulness, his mother felt prompted to listen to the message of the missionaries—one of whom was my son. As her testimony of the gospel grew, her husband began to feel the tugs of the Spirit and decided to accompany his wife and children to church. Within weeks the mother was baptized, and the father began asking what would be required to take his family to the temple in Montevideo.

One Sunday before the mother was baptized, my son and his companion were sitting with this family at church. My son looked at the 14-year-old and saw that he had a smile on his face from ear to ear. I wonder if my son couldn’t keep from thinking that this was a young man who was acting in holiness before

the Lord and reaping the associated blessings. President Cecil O. Samuelson has said:

We need to have the faith and capacity to move forward with the knowledge that when we are doing the right things in the right way, even when we face difficulties and challenges, we can expect and rely on blessings from heaven. [Cecil O. Samuelson, "The BYU Way," BYU annual university conference address, 23 August 2005, 10]

This young man in Uruguay was in the right place at the right time doing the right things. He was making the most of every opportunity to act in holiness. I am grateful for examples like this 14-year-old who inspire me to go and do likewise.

Acting in holiness is not an easy proposition. As we leave the building today, we will eventually experience stress or anger or a variety of other emotions that threaten the delicate balance in our worthiness to be led by the Holy Ghost. It requires heart to act in holiness when we feel tired, hurt, or mistreated. Eliza R. Snow understood this when she said, "It is no trifling thing to be a Saint" (Eliza R. Snow, "Saturday Evening Thoughts," *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 4 [2 January 1843]: 64; reprinted in *Millennial Star* 4, no. 8 [July 1843]: 44). In certain circumstances we may be required to give much.

On the night of December 29, 1876, the Pacific Express, a two-engine, 11-car train, was heading west through Ohio during a heavy snowstorm. Among the passengers and crew on board were Philip Paul Bliss and his wife, Lucy. Philip Bliss was a Christian songwriter and gospel singer. He had married Lucy 17 years earlier after coming to love her for her Christian virtues. At approximately 7:30 p.m., while crossing a trestle bridge over the Ashtabula River, the bridge collapsed, sending the 11 railcars 75 feet to the river below. As water pressed up from the broken ice, the wooden cars, heated by kerosene stoves, ignited. According to an eyewitness, as

reported in the *Chicago Tribune* the next day, when the train fell, Mr. Bliss freed himself and succeeded in crawling through a window. He turned around to pull his wife free but found she was pinned in the ironwork of the seats. Rather than escape, he devotedly stayed by her side in an attempt to free her before they were both engulfed and consumed in the flames. Ninety other people were killed or later died in the Ashtabula River railroad disaster, the worst such incident in American history to that point in time.

You may be interested to know that, although Philip Bliss was not a Latter-day Saint, three of his songs appear in our current hymnbook. We sang one of them together this morning: "More Holiness Give Me" (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 131). At undoubtedly the most stressful moment of his life, Mr. Bliss lived his lyrics.

Of course the Savior's Atonement in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross represents the supreme example of holiness under stress. This is all the more reason for us to act in holiness. Each time we do so, we express our loyalty and love to our Father in Heaven and demonstrate our faith and hope in and reverence, appreciation, and gratitude for His Holy Son.

Again, our commitment to holiness appears to be very important to the Lord. Of all the doctrines or exhortations that could have been used as a conclusion to the Book of Mormon, I find it interesting that Moroni described the process of holiness. Consider these words in that context:

Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God.

And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot. [Moroni 10:32–33]

I believe we are placed on this earth to be sanctified. The Lord has declared that His work and glory is “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). May we focus more consciously on acting in

holiness and make it a habit of practice while becoming more mindful of the moments and opportunities in our lives. Then we can rely on the enabling and redeeming power of the Atonement with the hope that the Savior will eventually sanctify us and make us pure and holy. In D&C 60:7, the Savior assured us by stating: “I am able to make you holy.”

That we may move forward together in our best efforts to act in holiness before the Lord and then feel the joy reserved for those who honor Him and love Him is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.