

To Fulfill All Righteousness

CECIL O. SAMUELSON

I am grateful for this opportunity to be with you. I have chosen to consider with you a general theme that for me, at least, is far from finished in terms of my own explorations and endeavors. I believe that I am beginning to understand more of the dimensions and wrenching commitments that are required to fully grasp it and am trying, like most of you, to be headed in the proper direction.

I believe I have come not only to understand but to appreciate that the necessary and exciting quest to become more like Jesus is a lifelong process rather than a single, identifiable event, as some might suppose. Further, the Savior's Atonement, which is most fundamental to all that we believe and teach, is fully operative now for those who have chosen to be facing the direction Jesus has pointed out for us—as well as it will be on that great day when “every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess” who and what he is (Mosiah 27:31).

In spite of these truths to which we subscribe, there yet remain great possibilities and temptations in our lives for distraction. I recognize both your devotion and sophistication in these matters and yet sense that we all might profit from certain reminders from time to time.

Often we may become so preoccupied with or distracted by things that are sad, negative, disappointing, frightening, frustrating, evil, sensational, or even positively exciting that we may be deflected from proper consideration and application of the small, seemingly routine yet vital parts of life that ultimately make such a difference. Many of the good things that you do routinely, or should do, will not be considered newsworthy by most—thank goodness!—but nevertheless have consequences that are vastly underestimated. In fact, it is these apparently “little” things that often make the most difference in our lives and in the lives of others.

The Savior taught that it is often the seemingly inconsequential thought, word, or act that is deterministic in the eventual outcome of our lives (see Matthew 5:13–48). Faithful but impetuous Peter needed to be reminded of this yet again when Jesus washed the feet of the Twelve (see John 13:1–15). The rich and successful man, who seemed to have everything and

Cecil O. Samuelson was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 1 August 1995.

who thought comfortably that he had consistently kept the commandments, was still pointedly rebuked by Jesus and told, “Yet lackest thou one thing” (Luke 18:22). Even those who are doing the basic things so well and are so deserving of commendation for their efforts to build the Lord’s kingdom and qualify as his faithful disciples perhaps might profit by considering what thing or things may yet be lacking in their lives. Many of us might find an honest list uncomfortably long from time to time!

The prophet Nephi, explaining why the Savior was to be baptized in spite of his being “holy” or perfect, used an interesting phrase: to “fulfil all righteousness” (2 Nephi 31:5–6). Later, at the time of this most sacred event, Jesus himself used this phrase, “to fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15), in his explanation of the necessity of this ordinance to the reluctant but obedient John the Baptist.

Assuming that we would also like “to fulfil all righteousness,” we need to clearly and more fully understand what this entails.

Righteousness has, I suppose, come to have several meanings, but that to which I refer and believe the prophet was describing is that which is “acting in accord with divine . . . law” (*Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*).

Clearly, because the Savior was sinless and without blemish, fulfilling all righteousness requires much more than just the avoidance of sin. The righteous life then cannot be a merely passive existence but obviously requires active performance and behavior, which has never been promised to be easy.

Understandably, in our zeal to do “the right thing,” our focus may be almost entirely on not doing “wrong things.” Lest I be misunderstood, it is not only proper but absolutely essential that certain things be assiduously avoided if we wish to be righteous. In fact, as the Lord revealed the Ten Commandments to Moses, we all recognize that the majority of these commandments were given in the “thou

shalt not” format (see Exodus 20:1–17).

As important as it is to avoid the sins of “commission,” I would like to suggest that some of the risks and temptations related to the sins of “omission” are also very worrisome. Both might be profitably considered in the context of some of the superficially tiny things that may really matter most.

As somewhat of an aside, I am quite pleased that many of our friends and observers in the world increasingly characterize the Latter-day Saints in a positive light for the things we typically do not indulge in, such as alcohol, drugs, tobacco, and sexual immorality. I do worry that far fewer might not affirmatively think of or mention the extraordinarily good things that many of you are trying to do, largely as a consequence of your conscious discipleship of the Savior.

Again, lest I be misunderstood, I recognize with gratitude that Latter-day Saints are more and more being recognized for their positive family values, their willingness to be involved community citizens—particularly in the context of earthquakes, floods, and other disasters—and for the exemplary lives lived by an increasingly large number of faithful Latter-day Saints in a broad array of activities and endeavors.

As important as the perceptions of others are, however, I would like to concentrate primarily on how we might view ourselves and how we might properly structure our own attitudes and activities as we attempt to “fulfil all righteousness.”

In the first decade of the organization of the Church in this dispensation, many conditions and circumstances and even the geographical locations of the main bodies of the Church changed rapidly. What did not seem to change, however, was that the message of the Restoration was not uniformly received with affection and appreciation. This was especially true for the representatives and advocates of the then newly emerging Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-day Saints. In fact, it was often not only risky to one's popularity but even to one's mortal existence to be too closely identified with the Latter-day Saints.

Happily, in our time some of the obvious physical risks to life and limb for disciples of the Savior in his restored Church have been greatly lessened; but, unhappily, the adversary's compensatory attacks and challenges upon our spiritual lives have not decreased in the least but have only become more insidious and sophisticated.

Most of you are familiar with the general details of the history of the Church in those first few years. After relocating from New York and Pennsylvania to Kirtland, very soon many of the Saints and leaders of the Church were drawn to Missouri with the potentially great blessings the Lord had promised to his Saints, predicated on their faithfulness, in that part of the land.

It was there, in the emerging community of Far West, Missouri, that a very important and instructive revelation was received by the Prophet Joseph Smith on July 8, 1838. In that remarkable communication from the Lord, among other instructions, were given very precise directions related to the beginning and unfolding of international missionary work. Almost unique among the published revelations given through the Prophet Joseph was that the Lord specifically instructed his servants as to not only their missionary labors "over the great waters," but also as to the exact time and place from which they should take their leave (see D&C 118).

At the time the revelation was received in July 1838, although the Saints were having difficulties with their neighbors in Missouri, I suppose most of the leaders and members did not appreciate how difficult fulfillment of this revelation, with its attendant specific prophecies, would finally be. In the ensuing months, after the revelation was received, conditions became even more difficult. Persecution

increased, and the Prophet Joseph, together with several companions, was incarcerated in Liberty Jail while the body of the Church was physically expelled from Missouri by an edict of the governor.

Interestingly, this revelation outlining the departure of the Twelve Apostles as the first missionaries to Great Britain from the temple site at Far West, Missouri, on April 26, 1839, was not only well known to the leaders of the Church and to most of the members generally, but also to the opponents and detractors of the Church, several being apostates or dissidents.

The attitudes of those involved or observing these events were interesting and could be divided principally into three groups. The first group included those who actively opposed the Prophet Joseph, the Church, and the mission of the Restoration. These were those who recognized that this revelation (D&C 118) was unusual with respect to the specific prophecies related to the time and place of certain events. They felt strongly that if they could prevent these events from taking place, the Prophet, the Church, and the work of the Restoration would be discredited. They spoke vigorously and organized aggressively to prevent the remaining members of the Quorum of the Twelve, and other key leaders who were not in prison, from returning to the temple site in Far West and doing their parts in fulfilling the prophecy that had been declared by the Lord through the Prophet Joseph.

The second group may have, in fact, been the largest. These were those who were interested in the revelation for various reasons but considered themselves to be only bystanders. There is evidence to suggest that even some of the basically faithful leaders and members of the Church felt that though the revelation and prophecies had been given with specificity, because conditions had changed the Lord would excuse his servants from attempting to fulfill them, and the mandate to accomplish the important work that had been previously prescribed by the Lord was no longer

operative, as was the case in some other instances in Church history.

The third group, although small in number and perhaps seemingly insignificant at the time, is the one on whom I would like to center our attention. These faithful Saints were those who not only understood the revelation and the prophecies included, but also felt heavy personal responsibility to see them fulfilled.

In 1869, thirty years following these most significant circumstances, Elder Wilford Woodruff of the Twelve, who had been a participant in these events, recalled them with great feeling. He reported that even among the Brethren in April 1839, the question arose, “What is to be done?” Said Elder Woodruff:

The general feeling in the Church, so far as I know, was that, under the circumstances, it was impossible to accomplish the work; and the Lord would accept the will for the deed. . . . Joseph was not with us, he was in chains in Missouri, for his religion. When President Young asked the question of the Twelve, “Brethren, what will you do about this?” the reply was, “The Lord has spoken and it is for us to obey.” We felt that the Lord God had given the commandment and we had faith to go forward and accomplish it, feeling that it was His business whether we lived or died in its accomplishment. [Wilford Woodruff, 12 December 1869, JD 13:159]

Elder Woodruff then went on to describe the trip of the remaining Twelve and a few trusted associates back to Missouri and the events of that early morning of April 26, 1839, in Far West, including the laying of the cornerstone of the temple and the other business that was conducted. He concluded his account of this experience by saying, “We then returned, nobody having molested or made us afraid. We performed that work by faith, and the Lord blessed us in doing it” (ibid.). A miracle had happened, but as Moroni explained, it would

not occur “until after the trial of [their] faith” (Ether 12:6).

I suppose that no one, even those who faithfully participated, could fully understand at the time the great impact on the kingdom of that cumulative and courageous act of faith which is so obvious today. Although the mission to Britain that was commenced by the Twelve at that time was not without great difficulty, the future success of the work was not only greatly strengthened but ensured by the fulfillment of the prophecy of July 1838.

Given the prophetic calling of the Twelve, it is very possible that they might have clearly understood the long-term implications of their actions. However, it seems more likely that most were involved in doing what they did not because they necessarily understood with any detail or clarity the future consequences of their acts, but rather because they wanted “to fulfil all righteousness.”

Most of us are familiar with the miraculous healing of Naaman, the Syrian, through the instrumentality of Elisha the prophet (see 2 Kings 5:1–14). Indeed, Jesus made reference to this wonderful and unique event in his own teaching (Luke 4:27). To be healed of leprosy was by itself spectacular. For Naaman, a rich and prominent man, to also learn the valuable lessons of faith and humility during this process was indeed a significant added blessing for him and all involved. A point of importance, however, that is easily and often overlooked is the small but vital antecedent act of the little Israelite servant maid to Naaman’s wife. She it was, in a seemingly tiny but dramatic act of faith and testimony, who identified for Naaman’s household the possibility and hope of a cure for Naaman from the vexing leprosy through the offices of a prophet of the Lord.

A small thing? Yes, but a superficially trivial statement that profoundly changed the life of Naaman for the better. Said the little maid to her mistress, “Would God my lord were with

the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy" (2 Kings 5:3).

Most of us will not, nor are we expected to, fully appreciate the implications of all of our decisions or actions. Likewise, not all of our choices or deeds will have the same level of impact or influence on ourselves or others. The challenge, however, is that we cannot know, usually, in a prospective way what it is that will make a real difference in our personal lives or in our efforts to serve and bless others. As a result, if we are prudent, we must really act and understand that all we do has the potential to make the real difference for us and for others. Likewise, we must accept the potential reality that what we *do not* do will also have possible geometric repercussions for many more, and in many more ways, than we might estimate.

As important as our good intentions are, in the last analysis it is what we do or do not do that determines real outcomes in our quest to become more like Jesus.

These sobering reflections alone might provide a basis for doing all that we can to "fulfil all righteousness," because even though the Lord knows the end from the beginning, we are most often not privileged to know now. Admittedly, we do need to do whatever is necessary to avoid the "big" mistakes, but we cannot afford such preoccupation with only escaping sin and bad decisions that we are deflected from doing the good we must do and making the hard but necessary choices we must make.

Likewise, we must painstakingly resist being tranquilized or overly encouraged by the displacement of major transgressions with "little" imperfections in which some of us seemingly take such pride. The adversary understands this principle much better than apparently do some of us.

The desensitization that has occurred in society over the last few generations in the media, music, and movies also sadly occurs in

some individuals in a gradual way. That infamous swear word first publicly uttered, at least in movies, in the film *Gone with the Wind*, which was incidentally thought to be so scandalous at the time, is now so commonly used that the originally objectionable term is not only tame but, by comparison, fairly inoffensive to many. Likewise, the Ten Commandments have retrogressively become to many the "ten suggestions," if they are even acknowledged at all.

Lucifer understands the significant power of incrementalism and also the disasters that can occur very gradually if only he is patient enough and persistent enough. He is subtle enough to do whatever is required to be occasionally or, hopefully, consistently invited into the lives of those who most of the time are doing the right things.

A wonderful representation of a very sad phenomenon is represented by C. S. Lewis in an amusing and insightful fictional correspondence between an elderly retired devil, Screwtape, and his young nephew devil, Wormwood, who is just beginning his work.

Wormwood, like many young people, devils and saints alike, tended to focus on the spectacular. He confessed to his Uncle Screwtape his disappointment in not being able to tempt his assigned client into committing some of the really big sins that ensure notoriety. Rather, he was distressed that he was only able to cause his assigned project to commit "little" sins or transgressions. His wise and experienced uncle, speaking from a devil's perspective, gave some very helpful observations.

You will say that these are very small sins; and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy. It does not matter how small the sins are, provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is

no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts. [C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, c. 1961, 1982), p. 56]

Screwtape understood that we are much more susceptible to superficially minor deviance from expected norms than we are to the really big aberrations. He also clearly appreciated that not only might little things lead to bigger ones but that even if they did not, they could and would keep participants from achieving what they should accomplish (see *The Screwtape Letters*, pp. 55–56).

What would the history of the Church have been had Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, and the others not returned to Far West that fearful April in 1839? It is impossible to say, but it is likely the Lord would have found them wanting. It is possible that Elders Young, Kimball, Taylor, and Woodruff would not have had the faith to do the really big things that they accomplished later, not only in the mission field but throughout their ministries, had they not faithfully taken that one significant step on that fateful day in Far West.

Would the history of strife and conflict in the Middle East have been different if the servant girl from Israel had not shared her faith in God and hope with Naaman's wife? Probably not, but the continuing impact for good on Naaman and his household would have certainly not occurred without her conviction-based testimony to her mistress.

Many of our responsibilities, opportunities, challenges, and crises are uniquely and individually crafted for our own growth, development, and testing. For those that are without direct parallels which might be observed in the lives of others around us, special and individual

responses are necessary if we are to be successful in meeting them. Happily, whatever the specific challenges, we have been promised sufficient help to overcome or meet them if we do our parts faithfully.

Most of what we face, however, is quite similar to that which others also encounter. This includes not only the multiple frustrations and opportunities of daily living, but also the basic commandments of God that have been given by our loving Father in Heaven to assist us, build us, and guide us to successfully meet all of the challenges and wonderful opportunities of mortal life.

The commandments or “rules” of God, if you will, have not been given to capriciously or arbitrarily or thoughtlessly vex or punish us. Rather, they have been provided to us as protectors, guides, leaders, teachers, and loyal friends to ensure we have what we need to “fulfil all righteousness” and to avoid the necessary sorrow that eventually and universally comes with the realization that after all, we may lack some thing or things that are necessary for eternal life.

In this blessed university setting, there are few who fail to understand what is expected of each of us in our quests to “come unto Christ” (Moroni 10:30). This certainly applies to the big things, but equally pertains to the little ones as well. Our challenge then seems to be to apply equally the Savior's injunctions and example in all areas and facets of our lives, including the small things as well as the large, to qualify to be described by him as those “whoso heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them” (3 Nephi 14:24).

May we live so that we can do all the things—and especially those that seem only “little” things—that are so necessary for us “to fulfil all righteousness.”

I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.