

Becoming Men and Women of Principle

ADRIAN VAN MONDFRANS

A Sad Case

A number of years ago, as a counselor in a bishopric, I was assigned to home teach some of the less active members of our ward. One of my families was a lone man who lived in a rented room. He was very hard to find at home. And try as I might to be Christian about it all, I was often glad when he was out and I missed him. He was an alcoholic.

One evening I found him home and very sober. He was sick with a liver disease which threatened his very life. His illness had scared him away from his passion for drink for a short while. As he sobered up, the painful memories of his life crowded him, and he sought relief. Usually his relief came through drink. This time I was there.

He opened up to me and told of his happy first marriage. His successes early in his life, his lovely wife, his children—his face beamed as he talked about this marvelous time of his life. And then his face clouded as he spoke of how the pressure to get ahead at work became hard for him to deal with, and he began to drink. And he drank, and he drank, and one by one his successes turned to failures. He lost his job, his wife, and his family.

Then again his face cleared and he told of a short interlude in his dissolute life during

which he married again. He also destroyed that marriage through his drinking. The tears came. He sobbed that he was dying alone, dejected, unproductive, unhappy—the personification of one brand of human failure.

I did not visit him again before he died. It was only a short time after our conversation that his death came. I was saddened by it. Then came the shock. His first wife called and asked if I would speak at his funeral. I was to be the only speaker! What could I say? Oh, what could I say that would comfort his former wives and family?

I worried about that funeral sermon about as much as I have worried about today's blessing.

A song, a prayer, my sermon, a song, a prayer, the trip to the cemetery, the brief ceremony there, and the dedication of the grave: It was all a blur to me. But at the end of it all one of his children came and thanked me. The words were something like, "As I listened to your sermon, a flood of memories came back—most of them bad. Yet some of them were

Adrian Van Mondfrans was associate dean of the College of Education at Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 1 June 1982.

sweet. My dad failed. He was weak. But he loved me. He was kind to me. Even when he was drunk, he wasn't mean to me. It was so sad. I hope that from him I can learn to avoid his mistakes while emulating his good characteristics."

I suppose that the last sentence, as hopeful at it is, would not be your choice of how you would like others to think of you, whether in life or in death. While it is true that most of us embody both good and bad, we rather hope that the good so far outweighs the bad that the speakers at our last rites will have much to speak about.

People Represent Characteristics

Now, I don't want to be any more morbid than I've already been, but it is true that people can come to represent characteristics of great righteousness or evil to us because of the lives they have led or are leading. Some people's names come to be synonymous with one or several characteristics. What character traits come to your minds when I say these names: Abraham Lincoln? Judas Iscariot? Joseph Smith? Richard Nixon? Adolph Hitler? Jesus Christ? David O. McKay? Are there names in that set which mean something to you? Not all good, I suspect, but clearly they mean something to you. I have some other names which won't mean much to you, but which mean a great deal to me.

Adrian Slotboom—my maternal grandfather. He was tall for his generation, about six foot three. Strong. Even his moustache and short cropped white hair were wiry and strong. But he was also loving and kind. Oh, so kind. Through him I came to believe that real men were strong and kind, had real reverence for life, loved all living things.

We lived in a basement apartment under him when I was growing up. I saw him almost every day. Oma, my grandmother, would call him to kill a spider in the house, and my strong

but kind grandfather would pick the spider up and carry it out to the garden rather than kill it.

Once my brother Gerald and I raised rabbits. This was part of our "war effort," along with our "victory garden." You may not remember victory gardens, but most of us were enjoined to have one—a little bit like the counsel we receive today from the Brethren. It seemed the bugs and neglect always won over our carrots and radishes, but at least our rabbits flourished. We spent happy hours harvesting clover and grass from the vacant lots of our neighborhood to feed our rabbits. They grew and fattened, and finally the day of the harvest came. Gerald couldn't kill and clean them. I couldn't either. Strong Opa, our grandfather, would. At least so we believed. He finally did because it needed to be done. But kind, loving Opa cried all the time he worked. Needless to say, we didn't raise any more rabbits.

David O. McKay—I mentioned his name earlier. He was the prophet for most of my growing-up years. I heard so many stories of his love for Emma that I vowed to myself I would always try to be kind and considerate to my wife when I got married. My lovely wife is here today. I've tried to live up to that resolve. She is the best judge of how well I've succeeded. If I have to any degree which has enhanced our marriage, David O. McKay had something to do with it.

I could name others: Miss Green and Adele Davis, two teachers who taught me that I could learn, that it took effort, and that they cared. To me they personify the characteristics of a good teacher. Roy A. Welker, whose manual on the Old Testament was used for several years in the Church, came to personify a successful Church member to me even more than the General Authorities—not because he was better, but because he was closer. He lived just down the street from me. He looked as if he should work in the temple, he had his year's supply, he read the scriptures every day, and he influenced us young men in the ward for

good. He wrote us on our missions. He prayed for us, and we knew it.

Rose Floyd, his sister-in-law. When I was around sixteen and cars and girls were very important to me, she called me in from the street one day. She was so excited that I could hardly wait to see what she wanted to show me. It was a painting—it cost as much as a new car! Arnold Friberg had painted it. She had me sit in a chair and just look at it. I did for awhile. I returned on several subsequent occasions. I came to conclude that the painting was worth it, worth even more than a new car. She helped me to understand much more about the real priorities in life.

Many more people mean particular character traits to me. They are still living so I hesitate to preach their funeral sermons here. However, I will briefly mention my mom—though she’s worth whole books of mention. She’s tough. Widowed with three young children, an immigrant to this country, she raised us alone working day and night. To me she means that a person of quality can take any thing life can dish out and conquer it. She taught me that *poor* is an attitude of mind, not a state of being. I never doubted that I would go on a mission, graduate from college, marry in the temple. What could stop me?

Develop Good Characteristics

Now to the point! When you say your own name to yourself, what traits of character spring to your consciousness? Are you clearly progressing toward strong character traits, becoming something good? Are you developing habits and attitudes which mean you are regressing toward something bad? Are you like Charlie Brown—just wishy-washy?

If you had a choice, would you become something good? I would certainly prefer becoming something good to becoming something bad. Would you? Or should we have as a goal to remain in a wishy-washy state—out of focus, not even useful as a bad example?

Well, I believe that you do have a choice! You can by conscious choices and acts of will become the type of man or woman you choose to be. Dream big, but understand clearly that those laws “irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated” control this too. “And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:20–21).

What principles of righteousness will we strive to live by? What choices do we have? Are there many? Is it not just like so much else in the gospel—at first blush it looks overwhelming? Then comes the bad logic we so often use on ourselves: “I want to be all things good. There are too many even to number. Therefore, I won’t start.” Can’t you see Satan smile? Try other logic. Start somewhere. For each good thing you would become, the pattern goes about like this:

Step 1. Learn what the characteristic you desire to develop really is. Read about it in the scriptures. Ponder. Pray. Ask for understanding. Study the conditions under which it applies, what acts it has inspired.

Step 2. Make the commitment to do it. Become, over time, the embodiment of the character trait you desire. Once you have made the commitment, be stalwart, not easily discouraged. Do not make excuses for your failures. Events don’t *cause* you to be anything. They simply trigger reactions. If you will to act differently than your first reaction, then by force of will you can. If you fall, repent! Know that the price of backing off your commitment is that, unless you repent, recommit, and live up to it, you are *not* what you wanted to be.

Step 3. Be willing to pay the price. Ultimately, Christ’s “yoke is easy, and [his] burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). But in the meantime not all will be sweetness and light. Remember this also: “Everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved” (John 3:20).

There will be distracters. You may end up as the butt of jokes, the object of vicious gossip, or even the victim of physical abuse. Is it worth it?

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? [Matthew 16:26]

You are making the choices. You will have to decide for yourself. But opposition is real.

One teenager I know had a “boyfriend” who wanted her to lower her standards. She refused—not because she did not like him or because she thought she was better than he, but because it was the right thing to do. Her own heart told her so. His reaction was to speak negatively about her, to influence his friends to be unkind, to abuse her with coarse language, and to even write in her yearbook that he was tired of her high standards and hated her. What was at issue here? It was not even necking or petting; it was “bear hugging” at school dances that started it all. Does it sound silly to you? I’m afraid it is not.

If you hold to high standards and try diligently to build your life on principles, you may well be labeled as a prude, a do-gooder, unsophisticated, square—a *straight arrow*. If they don’t want you to be a straight arrow, then what would they have you be—lascivious, a do-badder, sinful, shapeless—a *crooked arrow*? Can you imagine anything as useless as a crooked arrow? If you wanted to hit a target, reach a goal, predict a course of flight, which arrow would you pick? In working out his plans, do you imagine God picks *crooked arrows*?

First Principles

With these steps in mind, learn about the characteristic, commit yourself to it, and pay the price. What principle should we start on? You decide for yourself. I remind you that the

first principles of the gospel are “first, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, repentance.” We know it from the Fourth Article of Faith.

To me, these two principles are worthy principles to start on.

Faith

Of faith, Joseph Smith wrote that it is “the first principle in revealed religion, and the foundation of all righteousness” (“Lecture First,” *Lectures on Faith, Doctrine and Covenants, 1891*, p. 1). True religion is not just another do-it-yourself book based on man’s current best guess as to what is worthwhile and how you acquire it. True religion and the development of true character must be based on truth, righteousness, *all* the good things in the universe. God is their source. Christ is their champion. Our faith should center on them.

Much has been written by the prophets on faith, I’ll leave it to you to search it out and strive to understand it. That’s step one. Alma 32 would be a good place to start. Once you know what it would mean to have faith, you can choose whether you would rather have faith or be faithless. I think you’ll choose to be faithful. Commit to your choice. Then pay the price. Study, pray, act in righteousness so that the foundation of your life conforms to having faith, and faith will come. What will you give up—what is the price? You have to give up doubt, and sin, and put away idle things as you faithfully pursue God’s directions to you. Now, God’s directions aren’t always perfectly clear as perhaps sometimes you’ve noticed. Not because he doesn’t say things clearly, but because we see through a glass darkly.

I remember, when I was working at Purdue, having the opportunity to make a trip to Brigham Young University, and then a second trip, and then a third trip, and then a fourth trip. The object was that I would consider coming here. My wife and I, each time after I had been out here, would fast and pray about it and then feel quite relieved that we were not

required to come here at that time. We enjoyed our life at Purdue, and I felt we were making good progress both in our personal lives and in my professional life. Very quickly at Purdue I became an associate professor and even entertained thoughts of becoming a full professor while yet in my early years. But the fourth time we came out and fasted and prayed about it, we received clearly the indication that we were to come. So early in the academic year, well before Christmas, my wife and I decided that we would resign from Purdue University and make a commitment to Brigham Young University while finishing out the contract year.

They tried many things to get us to stay, including offering a full professorship, but we had made our minds up, and we came. My first year here was difficult. I had been here many months before I even had furniture. While at Purdue I could go to nearly any convention I could present a paper at; at Brigham Young University I ended up paying. When I handed out papers, it was at my Xeroxing cost in those days, and it seemed my career was coming quickly to a dead end. I wanted to be released. Yes, I felt I had been called here in the sense that the Lord had indicated he wanted me here at that time. But I had been here for a year. Wasn't that long enough? And so I fasted and prayed again, asking for a release. Then I prayed again and then again. Finally came into my heart the words, "You came here to serve and not to be served." Suddenly whatever was happening to my personal career seemed second place to whatever service I might be called upon to render. From that point onward, I've tried to live by that simple sentence, "You came here to serve and not to be served."

Repentance

Alma cried:

O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with

the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people!

Yea, I would declare unto every soul, as with the voice of thunder, repentance and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth. [Alma 29:1–2; emphasis added]

I think all who have faith in Christ could feel as Alma did. The Atonement makes it possible for us to repent and overcome our past sins. In my analysis of the benefits of being a man or woman of principle, one of the greatest is that repentance comes clearly into focus for me as a great gift from a merciful God and the process of true growth. If you have committed yourself to live by a particular principle, what errors can you make? What sins in that realm can you perform? I can think of only two:

1. You can fall short of your commitment. I think if you do, you'll feel sorrow. If your desire was real to begin with, you will desire again to live the principle in the future and to not have your failure this once brand you for all eternity. If you desire to be honest and you lie once, for whatever reason, however justified you may feel it is, you are a liar. Do you want to remain a liar forever, never able to enter heaven, subject to the father of lies? Of course not; you'll repent if your desire is real.

Remember, if you are not honest, you are dishonest; if not chaste, the lascivious and carnal minded; if not charitable, then mean and unloving. You don't want to be characterized by any of those negative statements, do you?

2. A second kind of sin is that you do not understand a principle fully enough so you apply it incorrectly or under the wrong circumstances. Sometimes you may be just when you ought to be merciful. If you err because you do not know enough, you will view the discovery that there is more to learn as a challenge, your mistake will be lamented, but not hidden or harbored up until it cankers your soul. You

will want to make things right; you will want to share your new understanding. All this will be so because you intended to do right. How much easier it is to repent when you err while intending to do right than when you are caught while intending to do evil.

Is it possible to err while intending to do right? Of course; that is why we need the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost to guide us in doing right.

Once a well-intentioned teacher set out to teach a class of youth a lesson in charity. After class instruction the class was to go home, secure cans and boxes of food, and bring them to a party. At the party the class would wrap the food, with a prize going to the best and most creative wrapping. The class members ate, drank, talked, and had a good time in general. Once all the food was wrapped, they placed the brightly wrapped packages in boxes and piled into cars to deliver them to a poor family to brighten their Christmas.

The boxes were placed on the porch. The students retired to the background, and the teacher pushed the doorbell. One child came to the door and looked out. When he saw the boxes, he was very excited. He called out, and his mother and the rest of the children came with great expectations—presents, lots of gorgeous presents! One of the children reached out for a package, hurriedly ripped the paper from it before his mother could stop him. It was a can of beans. “Ugh, it’s beans!” he cried. I was in that class. That is what I remember most of the evening: “Ugh, it’s beans!” It rang through my heart and soul. “Ugh, it’s beans!” It registered in my head and stuck there until I had to do something about it.

Where were the fulfillment and joy that charity should bring? I went to the teacher. I was the only one. I asked why I felt so sorrowful when I should feel something else. Finally, whether out of desperation or inspiration, the teacher blurted out: “If you feel that way, why don’t you do something about it?”

I did. I read about the principle of charity. It is the love of Christ. I didn’t do my part of the activity out of love. I gave something that was not mine. I suppose that many of the parents who earned the food which we gave were not even aware that *they* were being “charitable.” I decided, finally, that I would test the principle of charity.

I thought and prayed about it until I was blessed to understand that some neighbors of mine had a real need. They were old. They could not keep their house clean. It was not messy, but wallpaper needed cleaning, walls and woodwork needed washing, and floors needed real scrubbing and new wax. The man of the family had helped us with some home repairs years before. I do not think he charged all he could have. While old people scared me, I determined that I would approach them. They were skeptical.

I worked; I scrubbed, waxed, and rubbed. I sweated and got stiff and tired. When I was finished, things actually looked better. They were grateful and wanted to pay me for my efforts.

I took my pay in the fresh understanding that acts of love which cost you real effort reap you real rewards! Charity is a true principle. I knew it then. I know it still. I am grateful for the force of “Ugh, it’s beans” in my life. I repented of my shallow experience and sought out a deeper one so that I would know the principle of charity is true and good. Surely the Lord is the best paymaster.

The Way You Do Things

One experience with a principle, however, is not sufficient to recreate you into its embodiment. You might come to know it is true and good, but you do not *become* it until you practice it over and over until it becomes the way you do things, naturally. Or should I say, unnaturally, since you will have to put off the natural man, and become a spiritual man, to embody the principles of truth.

Well, what do you want to be? Do you young men want to have real power in the priesthood? Listen to the conditions:

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only 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—

Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reprov'd, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy;

That he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death.

Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven.

The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and they scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever. [D&C 121:41–46]

Note that definition of what characterizes the real brethren of the priesthood: persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, kindness, pure knowledge, sensitivity to the Holy Ghost, love, faithfulness, charity, and so on.

Do you want to serve God well? Listen to the conditions:

Therefore, O ye that embark in the service of God, see that ye serve him with all your heart, might, mind and strength, that ye may stand blameless before God at the last day.

Therefore, if ye have desires to serve God ye are called to the work; . . .

And faith, hope, charity and love, with an eye single to the glory of God, qualify him for the work.

Remember faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, brotherly kindness, godliness, charity, humility, diligence. [D&C 4:2–3, 5–6]

Those are formulas as surely as formulas in a chemistry class are formulas. As we develop the characteristics named in the scriptures, we become men with power in the priesthood. We become servants who have the power to serve God and to have that service come to the benefit of others.

I pray that I will finish out my days as a man of principle; that I will increasingly become the man I profess to be: that God will not at the last day call out, “Thou hypocrite!” I once was given the invitation to write my own epitaph in a Sunday School class. It fell out of my scriptures while I was preparing this talk; so here it is.

Adrian Van Mondfrans: He was born, lived out his years on this earth, and died. He loved his wife and children. In all his weakness and with all his faults, he tried to serve the Lord. He was blessed with many opportunities to serve in the organizations of the Lord's Church. He also privately worshiped God and his Son and the Holy Ghost. His children respect him and are following in his footsteps in that they too are striving to serve the Lord.

What will people for generations to come say of you? What do they say now? What do you think of yourself? Through faith and repentance you can become what you wish to be. Of you, my brothers and sisters, the Lord could make straight arrows to help him reach his purposes true to the mark. May you not come to the last judgment to hear, “Thou hypocrite!” May your good intentions be matched with real understanding and correct actions so that “Ugh, it's beans” won't have to echo in your heart and soul. Rather, you'll learn that

God is the best paymaster. In the name of Jesus
Christ. Amen.