

Developing Testimony Into True Conversion

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We read in 2 Nephi 31:

“Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life. “

In a dreary wasteland, a dense mist envelopes and surrounds a lone figure. Visibility is less than a dozen feet. The mist swirls under a slight breeze, bringing a cold chill that pierces to the bone. The figure holds fast to an adjacent railing, bracing against it. The metal railing, instead of being cold, feels warm to the touch. It instils hope and comfort. A sound of footsteps breaks the silence, pebbles and dirt crunching together. The steps draw nearer, their cadence steady. Soon, a second figure can be seen as a shadow in the mist, and then, as it gets closer still, as a man. His brow is furrowed, and sweat drips from the tip of his nose. He nods to the first figure, then ducks under the railing so he can pass on the other side. Just before he is out of sight, he turns and asks, “are you just going to stand there?” then moves on, fading into the mist once more.

All of us are familiar with Lehi's dream and the imagery of the iron rod and its surroundings. We are all continually surrounded by the mists of Satan which consist not only of temptations for sin of every kind, but any and every thing that can *distract* us and stop our forward movement. Sports, movies, video games, scrap booking, Facebook, and countless other things, that, if put in their proper frame are perfectly fine to do, if placed too prominently in our lives, cause our feet to stop moving. When this happens, we don't necessarily stop doing good altogether, but like Mary's sister Martha, we

become “cumbered about much serving” rather than “choosing the better part” that Christ offers.

How can we determine whether we have stopped pressing forward, and what can we do about it if we have? First, to determine for yourself whether you have halted your forward progress, you can ask yourself a series of questions similar to the following:

1. Do I skip morning prayers?
2. Do I skip evening prayers?
3. Do my prayers usually last less than five minutes?
4. Do I skip more than one or two days of scripture study each month?
5. Do I lead my family in daily study and prayer?

While these questions may not cover everything, if you answer 'yes' to any of these questions, I suggest that a lack of performing these gospel basics are indicators that your feet have stopped moving. At this point, I can understand if there would be protests in the minds of some. 'I'm a faithful member', one might say. Or – 'I hold a temple recommend'. Or – 'I fulfill my calling's obligations'. Or – 'I have a strong testimony'. And so forth. While this may all be true, let us consider what Elder Bednar recently said. In the October 2012 conference, he offered one interpretation to Christ's parable of the ten virgins.

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“Ten virgins, five who were wise and five who were foolish, took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Please think of the lamps used by the virgins as the lamps of testimony. The foolish virgins took their lamps of testimony but took no oil with them. Consider the oil to be the oil of conversion.

“But the wise took oil [of conversion] in their vessels with their lamps [of testimony].

“While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.

“And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.

“Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps [of testimony].

“And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil [even the oil of conversion]; for our lamps [of testimony are weak and] are gone out.

“But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves” (Matthew 25:4-9).

END QUOTE

All ten virgins had similar testimonies. All knew the truth. But only five had sufficient conversion. The foolish had stopped pressing forward and ultimately failed to inherit what could have been theirs – a seat at the bridegroom's feast.

Regarding testimony, Elder Bednar said:

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“Testimony is the beginning of and a prerequisite to continuing conversion. Testimony is a point of departure; it is not an ultimate destination. Strong testimony is the foundation upon which conversion is established.

“Testimony alone is not and will not be enough to protect us in the latter-day storm of darkness and evil in which we are living. Testimony is important and necessary but *not* sufficient to provide the spiritual strength and protection we need. Some members of the Church with testimonies have wavered and fallen away. Their spiritual knowledge and

commitment did not measure up to the challenges they faced.”

END QUOTE

Even the apostle Peter had need of further conversion. Are we better than him? Although he walked and talked with Jesus daily, the Savior said to him:

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to ... sift you as wheat:

“But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (Luke 22:31-32).

Put another way, the Lord has said:

“..., Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

Once you have determined that you might be standing still in the gospel and no longer pressing forward, I suggest that it is conversion, or deeper conversion which can cause you to move forward in faith once again.

So what is conversion? Once more, some words from Elder Bednar:

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“The essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ entails a fundamental and permanent change in our very nature made possible through the Savior’s Atonement. True conversion brings a change in one’s beliefs, heart, and life to accept and conform to the will of God (see [Acts 3:19](#); [3 Nephi 9:20](#)) and includes a conscious commitment to become a disciple of Christ.

“Conversion is an enlarging, a deepening, and a broadening of the undergirding base of

testimony. It is the result of revelation from God, accompanied by individual repentance, obedience, and diligence. Any honest seeker of truth can become converted by experiencing the mighty change of heart and being spiritually born of God (see [Alma 5:12–14](#)). As we honor the ordinances and covenants of salvation and exaltation (see [D&C 20:25](#)), “press forward with a steadfastness in Christ” ([2 Nephi 31:20](#)), and endure in faith to the end (see [D&C 14:7](#)), we become new creatures in Christ (see [2 Corinthians 5:17](#)). Conversion is an offering of self, of love, and of loyalty we give to God in [gratitude](#) for the gift of testimony.”

END QUOTE

Consider if you will the Olympics and those who qualify to be Olympians. For the sake of this analogy, suppose that the Olympics are the undisputed pinnacle of sports. We know that Olympians are a relative few. Many try, but fail to qualify. But even those who try are far fewer in number when compared to the many millions of people who might be labeled 'athletes'. Countless athletes do not have Olympic ambitions at all. Of course, those who do qualify vary in talent and ability, but something they all have in common is the goal to be an Olympic athlete. None of them qualified on accident. Each of them trained, daily, consistently, carefully. Each measured their progress daily, weekly, monthly, yearly. Each was consumed to some degree with this desire. I suspect that for many, they would wake up thinking of this goal and fall asleep thinking of the same.

We can draw some parallels between Olympians and those who inherit the Celestial Kingdom. Like them, we cannot qualify on accident. The Celestial Kingdom must be our primary goal – the object and design of our very lives. We must train ourselves daily, consistently, carefully. We must measure our progress, through daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly introspection and prayer. We must become

consumed in its pursuit. We must wake up thinking about it and fall asleep thinking about it. If you read the journals of the modern prophets and apostles, you will see that they followed this pattern. We can do likewise, and indeed must if we are to inherit God's kingdom as they surely have. One major difference between Olympians and those who inherit Celestial Glory is that there is no time to beat. There is no score you must achieve. There are no preliminary games or matches in which you must medal. All who relentlessly train for the Celestial kingdom will qualify for that kingdom.

Before we get into some specific points that we can work on to become more converted, let us take a few moments to recall that it is Jesus Christ, His gospel, and His atonement that we must be converted to. We are not to become converted to a way of living or a set of rules. Indeed, the Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus' day were converted to the Law of Moses, to their ultimate destruction. We too can be so caught up in Mormon Culture, or just the things in our lives that we fail to see we are just like them.

Elder Bednar gives us five practical steps to conversion:

- 1) believing in the teachings and prophecies of the holy prophets as they are recorded in the scriptures

We must read the scriptures consistently in order for this step to be satisfied. The Spirit, which manifests truth to our souls in quiet whisperings, and which enlightens our understanding, works slowly over time and depends on our consistency. This initial step is critical and is the one I have seen most often neglected. Occasional reading is not enough. We must drink deeply and often from the well of the scriptures. And once the books are closed, we must continue to ponder upon what we

have studied.

The Savior has spoken on this point:

“Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me (John 5:39).”

2) exercising faith in the Lord Jesus Christ

Countless sermons have been spoken on this subject alone. Both scripture and our modern prophets and apostles have expounded what this means better than I can. However, let me summarize by saying that whereas belief in Christ – that He lived, suffered for our sins, died, rose the third day, and has paved the way for us to return to the Father through Him – is passive. If it is a beginning to faith, then it is well. If it is an end of itself, then we will be condemned. For faith is more than belief and causes us to act. Our actions are exhibitions of our faith within. To exercise faith means we believe in Christ, we believe what He has said, and then we *do* what He has commanded.

3) repenting

Those with clean hands and pure hearts inherit Celestial Glory. True repentance through the atonement of Jesus Christ cleanses us of sin and spares us from suffering. Jesus has said:

“Therefore I command you to repent—repent, lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not.

“For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent;

“But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I;

“Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—

“Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.

“Wherefore, I command you again to repent, lest I humble you with my almighty power; and that you confess your sins, lest you suffer these punishments of which I have spoken... (D&C 19:18).”

4) experiencing a mighty change of heart

In what way must our hearts be changed? We know that we are all born as what King Mosiah termed the 'natural man' and that this 'natural man' is an enemy to God. If we consider that God's Kingdom will not allow anything impure into it, and anything not in His kingdom is His enemy, then the 'natural man' must be impure. We must therefore cause our hearts to become something else, something pure and clean – the second part of the clean hands, pure heart formula. Indeed one of Christ's Beatitudes states: “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.” - meaning, they shall inherit the privilege to live with Him.

Jesus said:

“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

“And now for a man to take up his cross, is to deny himself all ungodliness, and every worldly lust, and keep my commandments. (JST Matt 16:24-26).”

“And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me (Matt 10:38).”

Note in that last verse that the person who 'taketh not his cross' still followed after Jesus. I suggest to

you that this person is at least a Christian and possibly an active member of this church.

What must we do to take up our cross and deny ourselves of all ungodliness? Imagine if you will two circles. One circle represents everything you want and desire; everything you think about; everything you hope; and the feelings you dwell on. The other circle represents everything God and our Savior want and desire for us; everything they think about regarding us; everything they hope for us; and the feelings they want us to dwell on. God is never-changing. His circle remains constant and is filled only with what is best for us. The commandment to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and follow Jesus means that we move our circle. We change the contents of it, creating a Venn diagram which should ultimately overlap completely with God's circle. Careful, regular and prayerful introspection and evaluation will allow the Holy Ghost to whisper to us what we need to work on now, today, and how we can move our circle closer to where it should be. And really, how quickly we move it is entirely up to us.

Jesus said:

“Therefore, if thy hand offend thee, cut it off;”

“And again, if thy foot offend thee, cut it off;”

In this He means to tell us that we must be willing to cast off our most loved and cherished and seemingly essential faults; our indulgences; our excuses; our weaknesses. It is this step that is the hardest and the one we must rely the most on our Savior for. He said:

“And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak

things become strong unto them (Ether 12:27).”

While the miracle of forgiveness of sins cannot be understated, nor over-appreciated, it is Christ's power to change our very being, to burn out the dross in our hearts and fashion one of purity and light that is the greatest miracle. For one can be repentant, can have clean hands, and still not inherit Eternal Life – for such an one would see God and yet not be like Him nor those who have gone through this process.

Indeed, the prophet Joseph Smith said, “If you wish to go where God is, you must be like God, or possess the principles which God possesses, for if we are not drawing towards God in principle, we are going from Him and drawing towards the devil.” And also, “We must have a change of heart to see the kingdom of God, and subscribe the articles of adoption to enter therein.”

5) becoming “firm and steadfast in the faith”

To be firm and steadfast is to be immovable. In every quality that God possesses that we adopt, we must root it so deeply in ourselves that we cannot again be changed back into what we once were. If we are built on the foundation of Christ's gospel and are continually building with the stones which are the first four steps – believing the words of the prophets both ancient and modern, exercising faith in Christ, repenting, and purifying our hearts – then the temptations, hardships, vicissitudes, and trials of life will not dash us to pieces but will break themselves upon us until the day that we are welcomed once more into our Heavenly Father's embrace as a true disciple of His Holy Son and are found clean and pure and worthy to be joint heirs with Christ.

Once more from Elder Bednar:

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“For many of us, conversion is an ongoing process and not a onetime event that results from a powerful or dramatic experience. Line upon line and precept upon precept, gradually and almost imperceptibly, our motives, our thoughts, our words, and our deeds become aligned with the will of God. Conversion unto the Lord requires both persistence and patience.”

END QUOTE

A final warning - Jesus said:

“But the day soon cometh that ye shall see me, and know that I am; for the veil of darkness shall soon be rent, and he that is not purified shall not abide the day (D&C 38:8).”

The time of the ten virgins is now. We are them. We have choices to make. Will we choose to press forward along the strait and narrow path of the iron rod? Will we choose the better part? Will we deepen our conversion in the gospel of Jesus Christ? As Easter approaches, I challenge each of you to reflect on your testimonies and conversion. I challenge you to make sure you are pressing forward through the mists in your life. I challenge you to train like a spiritual Olympian. We can all do better and we must. The cost if we don't is too great and we will be wasting the eternal gifts Christ has made available. I testify that we all can do these things and qualify for the blessing of Eternal Life taking advantage of the infinite and merciful atonement of our Savior, Jesus Christ. It is my prayer that we so do, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.