

Instruments or Agents?

Does Heavenly Father want us to humbly submit
to His will or actively exercise our own will?

By Lloyd D. Newell

Consider these two apparently contradictory scripture passages:
Speaking to the sons of Mosiah as they were about to embark
on their daring mission to the Lamanites, the Lord said, “I will
make an instrument of thee in my hands unto the salvation of many souls”
(Alma 17:11).

Speaking to the Saints attempting to build Zion in Jackson County,
Missouri, the Lord said, “Men should be anxiously engaged in a good
cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much
righteousness; for the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto them-
selves” (Doctrine and Covenants 58:27–28).

On the one hand, the invitation is to be instruments in the Lord’s hands.
On the other, it is to be agents unto ourselves.

An instrument does not act for itself; it cannot accomplish any work of
its own volition. A musical instrument makes music only in the hands of a
musician; a surgical instrument can do nothing unless it is controlled by a
surgeon. As the Lord said through Isaiah, “Shall the axe boast itself against
him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that
shaketh it?” (Isaiah 10:15). An instrument submits to the will of its master.



On the other hand, when the Lord refers to us as “agents unto [ourselves],” He seems to be encouraging boldness, assertiveness, initiative, and resourcefulness. He is inviting us “to act for [ourselves] and not to be acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:26). An agent is one who is trusted to make decisions for and act in the best interests of another party or individual—in this case, ourselves.

Some might ask, “How are we to be both a submissive instrument and a proactive agent?”

Whenever two gospel truths seem to contradict each other, that’s usually a sign that we lack complete understanding. The adversary, of course, would like us to get this wrong and err on one side or the other. This is one of his more effective tactics—if he can’t convince us to accept false doctrine, he might just persuade us to take a true doctrine to an extreme. Expecting God to run our lives completely and make all our decisions for us can be just as misguided as relying solely on our own understanding. Our responsibility is to find the right balance between these two extremes.

One key to solving this paradox is overcoming two tendencies: the tendency to resist and the tendency to resign. People who see themselves primarily as agents unto themselves may be tempted to resist commandments, which seem to limit their agency to act as they think best. By contrast, those who see themselves chiefly as instruments can feel resigned to a predetermined fate that they think they cannot control.

When we choose to submit our will to the Father’s by obeying His commandments, we are not surrendering our agency but expressing it—in the highest, noblest way possible.

Is Obedience to Commandments a Surrender of Agency?

When President Dallin H. Oaks, First Counselor in the First Presidency, was president of Brigham Young University, he sometimes heard students complain about the honor code or dress and grooming standards, asserting that these rules took away their agency. “If that silly reasoning were valid,” President Oaks said, “then the Lord, who gave us our agency, took it away when he gave the Ten Commandments. We are responsible to use our agency in a world of choices. It will not do to pretend that our agency has been taken away when we are not free to exercise it without unwelcome consequences.”¹

The fact is that when God gives us a commandment, He is not taking away our agency but giving us an opportunity to exercise it, by either obeying or disobeying. Those options are not available if we do not have commandments (see 2 Nephi 2:16; Doctrine and Covenants 29:39).

Far from limiting our choices, commandments make our choices clear. President Eyring taught: “God makes it attractive to choose the right by letting us feel the effects of our choices. If we choose the right, we will find happiness—in time. If we choose evil, there comes sorrow and regret—in time. Those effects are sure.”²

The Lord revealed how He views commandments when He told the early Saints:

“I give unto you a . . . commandment, that you may understand my will concerning you;

“Or, in other words, I give unto you directions how you may act before me, that it may turn to you for your salvation” (Doctrine and Covenants 82:8–9).

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ignorance of God's laws, which makes our range of choices narrower. That is ultimate captivity. The Savior taught:

"If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31–32).

When we choose to submit our will to the Father's by obeying His commandments, we are not surrendering our agency but expressing it—in the highest, noblest way possible. So when the Savior said, "Not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42), He was not giving up; He was

rising up! He was not abandoning His own will but aligning it—as He had done since premortality and throughout His life—to the will of His Father.

This is what God wants from us as well: not to throw our own will away and passively accept His but to change our will until we actively, passionately, eagerly desire what He desires. The scriptures appropriately describe this as a "wrestle"—not with God but with ourselves, to bring our will in line with His (see Genesis 32:24; Enos 1:2; Alma 8:10). We need the strength and power that comes from this wrestle. Only then will we be strong enough to cling to and defend His will in the face of intense opposition—God's will must become our will too.

Alluding to this same eternal truth, C. S. Lewis wrote: "A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness

A commandment, then, is a revelation concerning God's will. Without commandments, we would know less about God's will, and in a sense, that ignorance is what limits our freedom. Alma explained that those who "know nothing concerning [God's] mysteries . . . are taken captive by the devil. . . . This is what is meant by the chains of hell" (Alma 12:11). Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles put it this way: "The beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that it pours knowledge into our souls and shows things in their true light. With that enhanced perspective, we can discern more clearly the choices before us and their consequences. We can, therefore, make more intelligent use of our agency."³

Much of Jesus Christ's power rests in His perfect obedience to God's laws. We, likewise, gain power as we choose to obey God's laws. For example, a physician who understands and follows the laws of physiology has the power to heal a person from physical illness. Likewise, a musician who understands the laws that govern a musical instrument has the power to make beautiful music. Someone who does not understand the laws that govern medicine and music—or doesn't adhere to them—has limited freedom to operate in those spheres.

Similarly, a follower of Christ who understands the laws of God and obeys them has the potential to become like Him. That is ultimate freedom. It is the essence of the Father's plan for our eternal growth and happiness. Satan has the opposite goal. He wants us to receive less light and truth, keeping us in

of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water. And for that they must be free.”⁴

How Much Does God Micromanage Our Lives?

While sometimes we resist commandments because we mistakenly think our agency is being limited, at other times we seem to have the opposite problem: we too readily resign our agency to some predetermined fate. This

attitude manifests itself, for example, in a self-defeating attitude in which we seek to blame our circumstances or character traits on other things and other people.

A favorite target for this blame is the adversary himself. And ironically, he probably gladly accepts that blame, because if we believe that the devil can cause us to sin, then convincing us that we are powerless to improve ourselves becomes easier. This direct contradiction to God’s declaration that “the power is in them” (Doctrine and Covenants 58:28) is one way Satan attempts to “destroy the agency of man” (Moses 4:3).

The truth is that the devil cannot compel us to choose evil, just as God will force no one to heaven. The Prophet Joseph Smith observed, “God would not exert any compulsory means, and the devil could not.”⁵ In all the commands

and expectations of God, as well as in the enticements of the adversary, we are free to choose and act for ourselves (see Helaman 14:30–31).

While some may give the devil too much blame for their sins, others place too much responsibility for the course of their lives on fate, believing that their future is locked into some kind of pre-programmed destiny, regardless of the choices they might make. Such a view is inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ, which includes the precious principle of agency. In Heavenly Father’s plan, we make choices that can forever alter our course and determine our future. And the most important of these choices is the choice to follow Jesus Christ and walk the covenant path.

There is danger in saying, “Everything happens for a reason” or “It was all part of the plan,” because that could imply that everything that happens is according to God’s will. The truth is that some of what happens in life is contrary to God’s will—because after all, we are all free to accept or reject His will.

Of course God can intervene in world and personal events. But often He leaves us to make choices and deal with the natural consequences of mortality, of our own actions, and of the actions of others. Much of the time He forbears out of respect for our agency, for if He were to manipulate every detail of our lives, He would interfere with our agency and our eternal growth.⁶

This does not mean, however, that God is distant, distracted, or uncaring. In fact, it is truly amazing how much our Father chooses to become involved in the small and simple moments of the lives of His children. Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) of the Quorum of the

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Twelve Apostles taught: “God’s personal shaping influence is felt in the details of our lives—not only in the details of the galaxies and molecules but, much more importantly, in the details of our own lives. Somehow God is providing these individual tutorials for us while at the same time He is overseeing cosmic funerals and births, for as one earth passes away so another is born (see Moses 1:38). It is marvelous that He would attend to us so personally in the midst of those cosmic duties.”⁷

Those who are observant can see God’s hand in their lives in very personal, customized ways. When He does intervene, He does so within the framework of our agency, and His purpose is to teach, reprove, inspire, warn, comfort, and encourage us—not to control us. He is not the Great Micromanager, controlling and determining each moment and every event of our lives. He is so dedicated to our personal growth and happiness that He leaves much of the decision-making and work up to us. Righteousness must be freely chosen.⁸

This truth has important implications when we are faced with difficult decisions. Often we wish Heavenly Father would just tell us what to do and we would gladly do it. But perhaps this desire is inspired not only by a willingness to obey but also by an unwillingness to choose for ourselves and accept responsibility for our choices. God wants proactive, initiative-taking agents as much as he wants submissive, obedient instruments.

When making decisions about serving a mission, marriage, parenting, careers, or a host of other choices large and small, we are to study and

research, ponder and pray, seek the guidance and peace of the Lord, and go forward. Some choices are made quickly and easily, while others take much time and serious deliberation. Sometimes we seem to get an answer that is clear and immediate, and other times no answer seems to come at all. President Russell M. Nelson has assured us that God wants to speak to us,⁹ so perhaps in those instances where we receive no apparent answer, He is trusting us to exercise our own judgment and agency, based on the true principles He has already taught us.¹⁰

And therein lies the answer to the paradox, “Does God want his children to be submissive instruments or proactive agents?” It should not surprise us that the answer is, “Both.” He wants His children to become as He is, and that requires that we acquire the attributes of both a trusting instrument and a trusted agent. He wants us to humbly and willingly learn from our experiences in the hands of the Master so that we may one day be masters ourselves. ■

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NOTES

1. Dallin H. Oaks, “Weightier Matters” (Brigham Young University devotional), Feb. 9, 1999, 2, speeches.byu.edu.
2. Henry B. Eyring, “A Priceless Heritage of Hope,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 24–25.
3. D. Todd Christofferson, “Moral Agency,” *Ensign*, June 2009, 48.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (2001), 48.
5. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 214.
6. See D. Todd Christofferson, “Free Forever, to Act for Themselves,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2014, 16–19.
7. Neal A. Maxwell, “Becoming a Disciple,” *Ensign*, June 1996, 17.
8. See Richard H. Cracroft, “We’ll Sing and We’ll Shout’: A Mantic Celebration of the Holy Spirit” (Brigham Young University devotional, June 29, 1993), speeches.byu.edu.
9. See Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign*, May 2018, 95.
10. See Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Your Adventure through Mortality,” *Ensign*, Mar. 2019, 16–25.