

A Return to Virtue

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Now is the time for each of us to arise and unfurl a banner to the world calling for a return to virtue.



Last general conference, I was called by President Monson to be the new Young Women general president. As I stood in the presence of a prophet of God and was given this sacred trust, I pledged that I would serve with all my heart, might, mind, and strength. Prior to this calling, I had a small plate inscribed with a motto that read, “I can do hard things.” That little plate bearing that simple motto gave me courage. But now if I could change that motto, it would read: “In the strength of the Lord, I can do *all* things.”¹ It is on that strength that I rely today as I stand at this sacred pulpit.

Last April, two days after general conference, we held our first meeting as a newly sustained presidency. We hiked to the top of Ensign Peak, and as we looked on the valley below, we

saw the temple with the angel Moroni shining in the sun. For each of us, it was clear. The vision for our presidency was the temple. And our responsibility was also clear. We must “help prepare each young woman to be worthy to make and keep sacred covenants and receive the ordinances of the temple.”²

The temple is the reason for everything we do in the Church.³ The temple was the reason our pioneer ancestors left their established homes and came west. It was the reason they suffered privation and even death. Temple covenants were the reason that, although babies were buried along the way, those pioneers could sing:

*Come, come, ye Saints,
No toil nor labor fear;
But with joy wend your way.*⁴

Some lost everything but came into the valley with *everything*, really—temple ordinances, sacred covenants, and the promise of eternal life together as families.

Just two days after the Saints arrived in the Salt Lake Valley, Brigham Young and his associates hiked Ensign Peak. Atop that peak they unfurled a banner—a yellow bandana tied to a walking stick, which symbolized an ensign or standard to the nations.⁵ The Saints were to be the light, the standard. Last April, atop Ensign Peak, we three women also

unfurled a banner which we made from a walking stick and a gold Peruvian shawl. It was *our* ensign, *our* standard to the nations—*our* banner calling for a return to virtue.

Virtue is a prerequisite to entering the Lord's holy temples and to receiving the Spirit's guidance. Virtue "is a pattern of thought and behavior based on high moral standards."⁶ It encompasses chastity and moral purity. Virtue begins in the heart and in the mind. It is nurtured in the home. It is the accumulation of thousands of small decisions and actions. *Virtue* is a word we don't hear often in today's society, but the Latin root word *virtus* means strength. Virtuous women and men possess a quiet dignity and inner strength. They are confident because they are worthy to receive and be guided by the Holy Ghost. President Monson has counseled: "You be the one to make a stand for right, even if you stand alone. Have the moral courage to be a light for others to follow. There is no friendship more valuable than your own clear conscience, your own moral cleanliness—and what a glorious feeling it is to know that you stand in your appointed place clean and with the confidence that you are worthy to do so."⁷

Could it be that we have been slowly desensitized into thinking that high moral standards are old-fashioned and not relevant or important in today's society? As Elder Hales has just reminded us, Lehonti in the Book of Mormon was well positioned on the top of a mountain. He and those he led were "fixed in their minds with a determined resolution" that they would not come down from the mount. It only took the deceitful Amalickiah four tries, each one more bold than the previous, to get Lehonti to "come down off from the mount."⁸ And then having embraced Amalickiah's false promises, Lehonti was "poison[ed] by degrees"⁹ until he died. Not just poisoned, but "by



degrees." Could it be that this may be happening today? Could it be that first we tolerate, then accept, and eventually embrace the vice that surrounds us?¹⁰ Could it be that we have been deceived by false role models and persuasive media messages that cause us to forget our divine identity? Are we too being poisoned by degrees? What could be more deceptive than to entice the youth of this noble generation to do nothing or to be busy ever-texting but never coming to a knowledge of the truths contained in a book that was written for you and your day by prophets of God—the Book of Mormon? What could be more deceptive than to entice women, young and old, you and me,

to be so involved in ourselves, our looks, our clothes, our body shape and size that we lose sight of our divine identity and our ability to change the world through our virtuous influence? What could be more deceptive than to entice men—young and old, holding the holy priesthood of God—to view seductive pornography and thus focus on flesh instead of faith, to be consumers of vice rather than guardians of virtue? The Book of Mormon relates the story of 2,000 young heroes whose virtue and purity gave them the strength to defend their parents' covenants and their family's faith. Their virtue and commitment to be "true at all times" changed the world!¹¹



I truly believe that one virtuous young woman or young man, led by the Spirit, can change the world, but in order to do so, we must return to virtue. We must engage in strict training. As the marathon runner Juma Ikangaa said after winning the New York Marathon, “The will to win is nothing without the will to prepare.”¹² Now is the time to prepare by exercising more self-discipline. Now is the time to become “more fit for the kingdom.”¹³ Now is the time to set our course and focus on the finish. A return to virtue must begin individually in our hearts and in our homes.

What can each of us do to begin our return to virtue? The course and the training program will be unique to each of us. I have derived my personal training program from instructions found in the scriptures: “Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly.”¹⁴ “Cleave unto [your] covenants.”¹⁵ “Stand . . . in holy places.”¹⁶ “Lay aside the things of [the] world.”¹⁷ “Believe that ye must repent.”¹⁸ “Always remember him and keep his commandments.”¹⁹ And “if there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, . . . seek after these things.”²⁰ Now more than ever before, it is time to respond to Moroni’s call to “awake, and arise” and to “lay hold upon every good

gift, and touch not the evil gift, nor the unclean thing.”²¹

Recently I attended the blessing of our newest granddaughter. It was a holy sight to me as my husband and our sons, along with many other loved ones, encircled this little infant. She was so elegant all dressed in white—and it didn’t hurt a bit that she was named after her two grandmothers! But the thing that touched me most was the blessing given by her father, our son Zach. He blessed little Annabel Elaine that she would understand her identity as a daughter of God, that she would follow the examples of her mother, grandmothers, and sister, and that she would find great joy as she lived a virtuous life and prepared to make and keep sacred temple covenants. In that sacred moment, I prayed that *every* young woman might be encircled, strengthened, and protected by righteous priesthood power, not only at the time of birth and blessing but throughout life.

During the solemn assembly last conference when President Uchtdorf called for the sustaining of our new prophet and First Presidency, I watched the entire congregation of priesthood brethren arise and stand. I felt your strength and your priesthood power. You are the guardians of virtue. Then I was overcome with

emotion when he said, “Will the young women please arise?” From my seat, I saw all of you arise and stand together. Today there could be no more powerful force for virtue in the world. You must never underestimate the power of your righteous influence.

I testify that a return to virtue is possible because of the Savior’s example and the “infinite virtue of His great atoning sacrifice.”²² I testify that we will be enabled and strengthened not only to do hard things but to do *all* things. Now is the time for each of us to arise and unfurl a banner to the world calling for a return to virtue. May we so live that we can be instruments in preparing the earth for His Second Coming, “that when he shall appear we shall be like him, . . . *purified* even as he is pure.”²³ In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■

NOTES

1. See Alma 20:4.
2. First Presidency letter, Sept. 25, 1996.
3. See Russell M. Nelson, “Personal Preparation for Temple Blessings,” *Liabona*, July 2001, 37; *Ensign*, May 2001, 32.
4. “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” *Hymns*, no. 30.
5. See Gordon B. Hinckley, “An Ensign to the Nations,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1989, 52; Boyd K. Packer, “A Defense and a Refuge,” *Liabona and Ensign*, Nov. 2006, 85.
6. *Preach My Gospel* (2004), 118.
7. Thomas S. Monson, “Examples of Righteousness,” *Liabona and Ensign*, May 2008, 65.
8. See Alma 47:4–12.
9. Alma 47:18.
10. See Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, epistle 2, lines 217–20.
11. Alma 53:20; see also Alma 56.
12. Juma Ikangaa, quoted in Michael Sandrock, *Running with the Legends: Training and Racing Insights from 21 Great Runners* (1966), 415.
13. “More Holiness Give Me,” *Hymns*, no. 131.
14. D&C 121:45.
15. See D&C 25:13.
16. D&C 45:32.
17. D&C 25:10.
18. Mosiah 4:10.
19. D&C 20:77.
20. Articles of Faith 1:13; see also Romans 8:16; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:22; Jacob 4:6; Alma 37:36; Moroni 10:32.
21. Moroni 10:30–31.
22. “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles,” *Liabona and Ensign*, Apr. 2000, 2.
23. Moroni 7:48; emphasis added.