REPENTANCE & ATONEMENT


From a satellite broadcast address to religious educators in the Church Educational System at the Salt Lake Tabernacle on 2 February 2001.

At the center of the gifts of the Holy Ghost is His unique witnessing to us of Christ’s atoning act, history’s greatest emancipation.

The overall gift of the Holy Ghost truly is one of the greatest blessings available to members of the Church. We all need to stress—for ourselves and for those whom we teach—the vital connection with the gifts of the Holy Ghost. These gifts are vital at every stage of an individual’s life and in every situation of life. Members of the Church have received the gift of the Holy Ghost, but in many it lies dormant—somewhat like the ancients who had received the gift but knew it not (see 3 Ne. 9:20).

Consider the statement of Elder Parley P. Pratt (1807-57) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles:

“The Holy Ghost … quickens all the intellectual faculties, increases, enlarges, expands, and purifies all the natural passions and affections, and adapts them, by the gift of wisdom, to their lawful use. It inspires, develops, cultivates, and matures all the fine-toned sympathies, joys, tastes, kindred feelings, and affections of our nature” (Key to the Science of Theology [1978], 61).

What a promise! No wonder we are instructed to “seek ye … the best gifts” and their attendant joys (D&C 46:8). We are not limited to just one gift, though that is the minimum each is given. Since the realization of so many blessings does lie latent, the Apostle Paul urged us to “stir up the gift of God, which is in thee” (2 Tim. 1:6).

In the Holy Ghost’s role in the Godhead, He “witnesses of the Father and the Son” (2 Ne. 31:18; emphasis added), and further He actually glorifies Christ (see John 16:14). Ever relevant, this glorification of our Savior is so vital in the last days, when so many esteem Jesus, the Lord of the Universe, as “naught” (1 Ne. 19:7). Therefore, at the center of the gifts of the Holy Ghost is His unique witnessing to us of Christ’s atoning act, history’s greatest emancipation: “To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world” (D&C 46:13).

There is such a difference between the admiration and the adoration of Jesus!

The Holy Ghost Glorifies Christ and His Atonement

Christ’s Atonement, of course, is for super sinners and the midrange sinners and then good people who make a lot of mistakes but are not wicked! Each of these acts of drawing upon the Atonement requires us to put off the natural man. I am persuaded that so much of taking up the cross daily—daily, not quarterly or semiannually—consists of putting off the natural man (see Mosiah 3:19). Doing this involves some arduous isometrics—the old man working against the new spiritual man. That natural man, as you know, will not go quietly or easily. And even when he is put off, he has a way of hanging around, hoping to throw his saddle on us once again.

May I call your attention to the word repentance and the Greek word from which it came, which casts the concept in a broad and helpful light and which covers the ground so very nicely. If we understood the nature of repentance better, there would be more of it!

The English word repentance is the rendering for a Greek word which means “a change of mind,” such as changing one’s view of himself, God, the universe, life, others, and so on (see Bible Dictionary, “Repentance,” 760). How good you and I get at repenting will determine how good life is.

Those who overcome this world by repenting will in the process have formed character which will give them “so much the advantage in the world to come” (D&C 130:19).

So much, therefore, of overcoming the world consists of overcoming the proclivities of the natural man and woman. For example, submissiveness does not come naturally to the arrogant natural man. Meekness—which isn’t valued much as a virtue by the world—facilitates our submissiveness. For example, John the Baptist never had a greater spiritual size, in my opinion, than when he testified of Jesus’ emerging mission and said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Of John the Baptist, Jesus said in turn, “Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet” than he (Luke 7:28). But we live in a world in which people don’t gladly “decrease” so that someone else can “increase.”
Jesus was at His perfect best when things were at their worst in Gethsemane and Calvary. There could have been no Atonement without the character of Christ! None of the precious lines I am going to share with you now and what occurred in connection with them could have occurred without Jesus’ perfect character. He entered Gethsemane, and the agony by then was so intense, so overwhelming that, at least initially, He “fell on His face” (Matt. 26:39). And then we read of Him that He let His will be “swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:7), and He “poured out his soul unto death” (Isa. 53:12; Mosiah 14:12). Think of the imagery—pouring out His soul unto death and being swallowed up in the will of the Father!

He confides in us, in my opinion, what perhaps concerned Him most when He said, “Would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink” (D&C 19:18). In that connection, He felt “the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God” (D&C 76:107). I never recite or read that line without some inner tremulation—the fierceness of the wrath of the Almighty God,” during which He stood in our stead and paid for our sins. If we will let the foregoing imagery rest upon our minds and in our hearts more often, it will bring the special chemistry of contemplation, evoking an even deeper love for Christ and the Father and greater gratitude for what took place. Remember King Benjamin’s words about knowing Christ in our hearts and minds (see Mosiah 5:12-13). Remember, too, one of the gifts of the Holy Ghost is that He glorifies Christ.

**Greater Need for Our Personal Submissiveness**

Now, we often make some common mistakes when applying the Atonement in our lives. I will mention several. God leaves us free to make these very mistakes. Yet each of these mistakes reflects a greater need for our personal submissiveness.

First, we make a mistake when we think we own ourselves and that we own blocks of time. It’s a natural thing to do. But our faith in God includes faith in God’s timing, enough to be able to say, in effect, “Thy timing be done” (see D&C 64:32).

We make another mistake when we fail to realize how much serious discipleship consists of downsizing our egos and diminishing our selfishness! The bloated natural man will resist any downsizing. But meekness is what has to happen.

Another mistake we can make is that we maybe don’t take life’s little quizzes seriously enough. We think we will cram and pass the final exam! The infinite Atonement is there for our finite mistakes, including the daily mistakes we tend to make. It is understandable, of course, that we focus on the crunch times in our lives. We are mindful of these spikes of suffering and stress, and we sometimes, ironically, let ourselves become overcome by relentless routineness—with what might be called the daily dampening of things spiritual.

We make another mistake. We fail to focus on and to develop patience as well as faith (see Mosiah 23:21). These two attributes are in tandem; they go together. By the way, if we are meek, being tried means being developed. We don’t look at impatience in terms of its downside. When we are impatient, in effect, we do not honor what is implied in the words “in process of time.” We foolishly wish to have some of life’s moments over and done with, seasons to be over with, ignoring the possibilities for service that are inherent in them. We are somewhat like airline passengers in America who fly coast to coast and resent the space in between; but there are souls down there, not just sagebrush! Yet we want to fly over some experiences. It is so likely we will miss the chance to be of service. So it is with life’s seeming in-between and routine spaces! Impatience puts us at risk.

We may feel put upon by events and circumstances—another mistake we can make when not approaching the Atonement properly. Yet many of these things that we feel put upon by actually constitute the customized curricula needed for our personal development. Still, our tendency is to push away the necessary and prescribed courses of spiritual calisthenics. We can’t withdraw from all of life’s courses and still really stay enrolled in school!

Another mistake we make is that we foolishly think we are free to choose, without wanting the consequences of those choices! (see Alma 29:4). Bainville, the French philosopher, said, “One must want the consequences of what one wants.”

Another mistake commonly made is that we play to the mortal galleries! We listen too much to the wrong peers. There is what I call the mystic “they,” who for some become ascendant. In terms of the choices they make, they want to please the mystic “they.” We see this politically, in the corporate world, in academic life, and so on.

Some people are so anxious to be politically correct and to conform to the fashions of the world! What is worse, however, is when we see members of the Church try to conform eternal truths to the ways and thinking of the world. But it won’t work! As Paul warned, “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). It is a terrible mistake for us to try to please the world by twisting and conforming things that won’t fit in the secular matrix.
Now, these mistakes are but a few we make; they keep us from fully applying the Atonement to our lives. They are not worthy of Jesus and what He accomplished in Gethsemane and on Calvary!

To understand and have faith, therefore, in the character and the purposes of God means that instead of complaining, we accept (more than we do) the menu of life and what is allotted to us. Sometimes with particular individuals that may seem to be the equivalent of “Eat your spinach” and “Clean your plate.”

Part of discipleship should be to become high-yield, low-maintenance members of the Church. These members are not high profile; they won’t be on the six o’clock evening news when they die. But they have done what Heavenly Father has wanted them to do meekly and humbly.

I’m going to mention two such sisters. Many years ago, one wonderful sister, Roxie N. Rich, who had been married for 11 years in 1944 and had no children, prayed in the temple that she and her husband could have a child. And then they were able to adopt a child. She noticed that when the birth certificate was finally given to them, the birth of the child was on the day she offered the prayer in the Salt Lake Temple. Soon they adopted three deserted children and sponsored two others from Europe—five children at once in high school. She said in her letter to me that “I felt like a real mother then.” Sister Rich is 92 years old now.

Her husband, recently deceased, was a bishop and high councilor for 18 years. She wrote very modestly, almost offhandedly, that she had been a ward organist for 16 years. And to think of another sister with 16 children and over 100 grandchildren, who could say in her moment of departure, “I’ve been a good girl.”

We Should Glorify Christ

For you and me, to be part of this work amid these kinds of people is a precious thing. Since the Holy Ghost glorifies Christ as indicated, so should we. One of the ways you and I can glorify Christ is by improving and repenting, showing that we take seriously the proffered discipleship that comes from Him. We should care enough about it that it lies at the very center of our lives. The world may miss it altogether. The world may see the doctrines we teach as foolishness, but we know that doctrines drive discipleship and that the Spirit gives us so many gifts, including the several I have enumerated here.

I conclude by sharing my growing feeling of appreciation for another reality of the gospel. What we do on this earth is so vital, but it is actually a preparation for our labors in paradise in the spirit world. The scope in that spirit world is 10 times as large as are the demographics of this world. It is, though, a place of peace, a place of intense devotion. One sees in section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants words that tell us about the character of God. Not only will the gospel go to those who have never heard of it, but also included are those who have been in transgression, in rebellion, and who have rejected the prophets.

No wonder on Judgment Day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is the Christ. Those who have lived without God in the world will confess that God is God. His mercy is supernatural. Indeed, as the Book of Mormon says, His mercy “overpowereth justice” (Alma 34:15). Remember Brigham Young’s statement about faith in Jesus’ character, in Jesus’ Atonement, and in the plan of salvation? Such faith
should help us more than it is allowed to do by us at times. We can also understand that as important as our labors here are, they have to be put in perspective in the context of that plan.

We do not control what I call “the great transfer board in the sky.” The inconveniences that are sometimes associated with release from our labors here are necessary in order to accelerate the work there. Heavenly Father can’t do His work there, with 10 times more people than we have on this planet, without on occasion taking some of the very best sisters and brothers from among us. The conditions of termination here, painful though they are, are a part of the conditions of acceleration there. Thus we are back to faith in the timing of God, and to our need to be able to say “Thy timing be done,” even when we do not fully understand it.

I testify to you that the Church is led by a prophet who was prepared for a long, long time before he became the President of the Church. President Gordon B. Hinckley is naturally bright and keen. He has a fabulous memory and, most of all, is well connected with the Spirit.

The Church will pass through some turbulence that lies ahead. We will be all right. However, do all you can to be connected with the gifts of the Holy Ghost, and He will glorify Christ. He will give you a precious reassurance about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Faster than we realize, we are being more sharply defined and are seen in ways that are significantly different. We must measure up to our time and say with the ancient prophet Nephi, as he thought upon the ministries of those who preceded him, “I am consigned that these are my days” (Hel. 7:9). These are your days, brothers and sisters. And the intertwining of your lives with the lives of others isn’t simply reflective of this mortal second estate. I so testify to you! I seek to glorify Christ. I know it is my apostolic duty, but it is also my delight.