Clean Thoughts, Pure Lives

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We live in a day like no other. Those of you who review the scriptures know that the signs of the times are around us, and the prophecies of men of old have unfolded or are unfolding. These are the days preceding the Second Coming of the Master. I’ve made some observations of my own, as a member of the Presiding Bishopric, of growth in many areas of the Church. For instance, in the decade of the seventies the Church built about two thousand chapels. That’s in a ten-year period. Then, during 1981 and 1982, in two years, we built almost another two thousand chapels. And we have more than one thousand in process right now. You’ve read of the temples that have been dedicated, six in 1983 alone. I suppose that in each of the next two years there will be five or six temples dedicated somewhere in the world. As you know, the great work of the Millennium is the work that will be done in the temples. It seems to me that there is a preparation going on.

Yet, although there are many wonderful things happening in this day, this is also a time of danger. This is a time to be careful as you have never been careful before. It is a time to be on guard, because this is the time when “men’s hearts shall fail them.” (D&C 45:26.) This is a time when even the very elect will be deceived. This is a time when some will not have the courage to stand for what is right. This is a time when some will become complacent and take for granted the gospel principles. This is a time when many will pick and choose the commandments they will keep. This is a time when Satan is unusually cunning and effective, and he entraps many of us, sometimes without our knowing it. It is a time of trial for all.

The Ladder of Faith and Testimony

In spite of all this, there is hope. I am convinced that there is a spirit of revelation available to all of us to guide us in our trials. As you face your trials, may I suggest that you remember one thing: when you are in tune with the Spirit, you can handle any problem. I don’t want to make you think that those who are in tune with the Spirit don’t have problems. Everyone has them. But, when you are in tune with the Spirit, you are able to cope with the situation. And when you aren’t, to the degree you aren’t, things can become unglued and come apart at the seams, and you lose your composure.

We all vary in the degree of our testimony. Not everyone has the same strength of faith and testimony. There are those who are unusually strong in spiritual matters. Others may be farther up or down the spiritual ladder. Sometimes we become discouraged if our strength and faith are not as someone else’s seem to be. Sometimes we feel less important, less capable. May I suggest to you that I do not think it matters nearly as much where you are on the ladder of faith and testimony as which way you are moving on the ladder. There are many great and wonderful people whose testimonies are just beginning to flower. They are on the bottom rungs of the ladder, but they are moving up, and that is the most important thing. There are others who have peaked out and who have begun to taper and slip somewhat in their faith. That is when I get nervous. That is when I become concerned.

This growth is a process of improving and increasing in faith and testimony. It is a process of purification, of sanctification. Now, as some of us may be waiting for blessings to come to us, let us remember another principle. Moroni taught in the book of Ether something that oftentimes we forget. There are those who are constantly waiting for things to happen. They are waiting for blessings to come, not understanding what that great prophet taught. He taught that first we must show an evidence of our faith and receive a trial of it, and then the blessing comes. According to Moroni, we don’t receive blessings to strengthen our faith; we receive blessings because of our faith. (See Ether 12.) Eternal life is the blessing of the faithful.

Developing purity of thought is a vital and important part of building faith and of the sanctification process. President George Q. Cannon, a former counselor in the First Presidency of the Church, said: “If a man be pure in thought, he will be correspondingly pure in action; but if he allows his mind to roam in unrestricted freedom through the various avenues of evil or to dwell unchecked upon the contemplation of forbidden
indulgences, it will not be long before his feet tread those paths and his hand plucks the tempting but deceitful fruit. When once the tempter gains the citadel of the heart, his power is very great, and there is no knowing to what excesses of folly and crime he may incite his unhappy victim.” (George Q. Cannon, Gospel Truth, vol. 2, comp. Gerald L. Newquist, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1974, p. 200.)

The destructive forces of Satan are becoming increasingly more effective in their relentless pursuit of the hearts and minds of men and women everywhere. Many of the very elite in the army of the Lord quite innocently have been led into habits that are gaining a stranglehold on them. I fear that there are members who are far less effective and far less satisfied with themselves than they could be or would be if they weren’t so afflicted. Many of you may be victims and may not realize it.

Arizona Reservoirs

In east central Arizona there are some high and often snow-packed mountains. We refer to them as the White Mountains. From this fountainhead stem most of the major water producing streams that fill the agricultural and domestic needs of the valleys of central Arizona. From these mountains comes the water supply for the homes in the city of Phoenix. In the wintertime the mountains are covered with snow many feet deep. The streams that begin here run cool and clear, filled with delicious life-giving water. The streams run many miles in this unpolluted condition as they move down the mountains, through the valleys, eventually to empty into great reservoirs built to store water during periods of drought.

There are also in eastern Arizona many high-grade ore deposits which have been mined for many years, copper being one of the principal metals. Some of the streams which originate in the White Mountains run through the mining towns, and their water is used by the smelters in the processing of ore. The harmful waste from this process in some cases finds its way back into the streams, discoloring the water and making it unfit for human consumption. These streams also empty into the great reservoirs.

There are seasons of the year when there are cloudbursts in the mountains upstream from the dam. These storms erode large amounts of soil and wash brush and sometimes trees down the rivers into the reservoirs.

These reservoirs hold everything that is put into them: the cool, clean, clear, and delicious water coming from the glistening snowpack, as well as the polluted water from the industries and the brown, silt-filled waters resulting from the summer thunderstorms. All of it accumulates behind the huge rock and concrete dams.

Part of the water that is held behind these dams is used as a domestic water supply for over a million people. In this condition the water, of course, is undrinkable because of the impurities that have been dumped into it, so there must be a filtering system.

First, there are large grates and nets and coarse screens that filter out leaves, branches, and dead animal life. The filtering system gets finer and finer as it removes other harmful impurities. Finally, after much careful attention, it is released into the pipelines of the cities in a now purified condition ready to be used by the people of the valley.

Pollution of Our Minds

When we were born on the earth, our minds and thoughts were clean and sweet and pure, unpolluted by harmful impurities. In our infancy our minds were free from unrighteous and unwholesome thoughts. We are innocent and untouched by the harmful effects and influences of Satan. Our minds, which are like tremendous reservoirs themselves, are capable of taking in whatever they may be fed, good and bad, righteous thoughts and experiences as well as trash and garbage.

As we go through life, we may be exposed to stories, pictures, books, jokes, and language that are filthy and vulgar, or to television shows, videos, or movies that are not right for us to see or hear. Our minds will take it all in. They have the capacity to store whatever we give them. Unfortunately, what our minds take in they keep, sometimes forever.

It is a long, long process to cleanse a mind that has been polluted by unclean thoughts. Sometimes our minds may be so cluttered with filth and pollution that they are unable to be a spiritual strength to us and to our families, let alone to mankind in general. When in this condition, we find our thinking processes are not clear or correct. Work may be overwhelming. Everyday problems are more difficult to solve. Decisions are often made based on shaky facts. We say and do things we would otherwise never be a part of. We are not at our best.

Cut Off the Flow of Trash

To avoid this impure condition, there are two things we must do. First, we must stop the flow into our minds of these unhealthy and unwholesome streams of experiences and thoughts. Evil acts are preceded by unrighteous thoughts, and unrighteous thoughts are born of vulgar stories, jokes, pictures, conversations, and a myriad of other evils or foolish products.
Vulgarly appears in many ways. We live in a society where profanity and vulgar language are accepted means of conduct and expression, even a way of life for some. Elder Boyd K. Packer has said: “The reality of profanity does not argue for the toleration of it. . . . We are victims of a vile habit.” (In Conference Report, Oct. 1967, p. 127.) There are those who are victims, who are misled into thinking this is acceptable conduct for a Saint, who think the influence is not that serious. I would suggest that some are misled who think that vulgar language occurs only now and then when a person utters obviously crude or offensive words. Vulgarity is not so rare as it should be. It is sustained by constant exposure to a steady diet of vulgar and filthy experiences.

We might consider vulgarity in a couple of ways: first, as an expression of a personal weakness; second, as a contribution to a personal weakness. Some demonstrate or express a personal weakness when they tell jokes or stories about the body and its functions, when they joke about or make suggestive comments concerning women or girls, when they are casual about sacred things. There is vulgarity when some speak crudely of body parts or sexual matters. Too often, common slang, even gutter terms, are used by brethren of the priesthood as well as by many of the sisters. We often use anger as an excuse for such an utterance. This is wrong. It comes of Satan; he is the author. No one need swear or be vulgar at any time.

Some contribute to this personal weakness when they read filthy magazines, watch unwholesome movies, television shows and videos, or remain in a group where unclean discussions occur. Some married couples will even joke about sexual matters. Each of these kinds of experiences will weaken any spirit and make it less able to withstand the fiery darts of the adversary.

Now, my brothers and sisters, beware of loose thinkers. The subtlety of their influence can be disarming and destructive. Regardless of what others may do, we should not view or talk about suggestive movies. Shun them as you would the plague. A good movie with only a little pornography or vulgarity is not a good movie. Avoid pornographic magazines or pictures or music—and I plead with you, be careful of the music—or retelling filthy jokes or crude stories.

Once in a while we should stop and ask ourselves, “In whose army are we fighting? Whose battle lines are we defending, Satan’s or the Savior’s?” We are in one or the other, and, like it or not, our actions signal our true allegiance. Do you have the courage to walk away from an off-color movie or video? Or do you watch, listen, absorb, and suggest to yourself, “This soon will pass” or “Everyone is doing it; it must be acceptable entertainment”? Have you the courage to keep out of your home television shows and videotapes that are filled with suggestive sexual conversation and even visual experiences? I think one of the subtle dangers that we face are the so-called “soaps.” They tell, teach, and display the deterioration in morals and in marriage. Have you thought lately how effective these shows are in piercing even the strongest spirit? We must not feed ourselves a diet of trash. We become what we think; we think about things we hear and read and see.

Run through an exercise with me for just a moment. Picture yourself on whatever level of that ladder we talked about earlier, the ladder of faith and testimony. Whether you are low or high, as I said, doesn’t matter nearly as much as which way you are going. Now assume that tonight or this evening you watch a movie or show in which there are obvious sexual conversation and implications of breakdown in morals. If you watch that show, whatever level you are on, in my opinion, your spirit will step down just a bit after having had the experience—just a bit—not much, but a bit. Or assume that this afternoon you are involved in retelling an off-color story; your spirit will step down [page 73] again.

Every time you go through one of these experiences, the spirit steps down little by little. As I have reviewed Church court cases over the years, I have found that the tragedies that occur in the lives of men and women do not occur overnight in a hurry. They are a step-by-step process. Now, I am not suggesting that if you see immorality displayed in a movie you are going to be involved in immorality. Some will, in the process. But I do know this: there will be a dilution of the spiritual strength within you that will have its long-term effect, even if you never get involved in an immoral act. Every time you put some of this material into your mind, your righteousness and your power to do good, to think clearly, and to make decisions that are proper will be diluted.

Cleanse the Reservoirs of the Mind

Assuming that you have cut off the flow of trash (not cut it down, but cut it off), the second thing you must do is set up a filtering system which will cleanse the great reservoirs of your mind so that the thoughts coming from it may again be pure and fit for your use and for the blessing of others. The effectiveness of your filtration system depends upon the pattern of your life. You will be no more successful in helping yourself and others than you are pure in your mind. True, you may systematically perform many of the tasks that are assigned in the Church: teach a Sunday School class or
Relief Society or priesthood lesson; prepare reports, conduct meetings, and so on. But unless your spirit is in tune, and you speak, teach, and act under the direction of the Holy Spirit, you accomplish little of an eternal value.

The secret of cleansing the spirit of impurities is not very complicated. It begins with prayer every morning and ends with prayer every night. This is the most important step I know in the process. It may simply be a prayer for strength to turn from bad habits or a prayer that sin will be distasteful to you, remembering not all prayers are answered the same day or even the next day. Sometimes it takes a long time. But with this step in place, I’ve seen hundreds of miracles take place. Without it, there is continued frustration, unhappiness, ineffectiveness, and despair. If you have tried and have given up, I plead with you to try again and again and again. Our Heavenly Father will not forsake your efforts if you persist.

An added refinement in your filtering process, an added measure of spiritual maturity, can be found in a daily study of the scriptures. Your study need not be long, but it should be every day. If I were you, I would read the scriptures tonight and never let a day pass without reading in them, even if only for a few minutes. There is an added measure of inspiration promised to those who read the scriptures regularly.

Continue the cleansing of your spirit by doing something good for someone that he or she doesn’t expect. Keep it simple, but do it daily. It may be only a cheery hello, a short daily phone call to a homebound friend, a wheelchair ride for an elderly patient, a thoughtful note to someone who is sick or who has lost a friend. It may even be picking up your dirty clothes to thrill an unsuspecting parent, spouse, or roommate. According to the scriptures, a disciple of the Savior is first a servant of others.

When necessary, receive the blessing that comes with the confession process. Too many are harboring the inner feeling of guilt resulting from unrepented mistakes. Part of the repentance process is confession. If you happen to be one of those who has this need, I plead with you to go see your bishop before the sun sets today.

And finally, pick a commandment you are still struggling with and obey it; give it an honest chance to bless your life.

To Cleanse the Spirit

Now, remember: first stop the flow of polluted thoughts; be far more selective of the experiences you feed the great reservoir of your mind. Second, develop an effective filtering system that will remove the impurities and cleanse the spirit. Let your spirit become a powerful influence for good. Spirituality is a product of righteousness; it is not an unearned gift. And when you are in tune spiritually, you can handle any problem, and you can be sanctified.

I testify that the Savior is at the head of this work for which you and I are responsible. I also add my prayer that each of us will be found faithful in the things with which we have been entrusted. For the Lord said, “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.” (D&C 4:2.)

Purity of thought is one of the secrets to a happy and productive life and to the eternal rewards of a loving Father in Heaven.