Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the Christ-centered life that makes it so difficult to discuss. Its requirements are actually quite simple: keep his commandments!

On the Right Course, Right Direction

To begin with there is the matter of our life’s course or direction. In the sixth Lecture on Faith, the Prophet Joseph Smith said we need to know “that the course of life we are pursuing “is according to the will of God, in order to … exercise faith in him unto life and salvation.” (In Lectures on Faith, comp. N. B. Lundwall, Salt Lake City: N. B. Lundwall, n.d., p. 57.) Obviously, our imperfections make God’s full and final approval of our lives impossible now, but the basic course of our life can be approved. If we have that basic reassurance, we can further develop faith. Once our direction is correct, we can give attention to pace.

Learning to Play Checkers—Doing the Measurable Duties

There are various and specific duties in the “course of life” which go with (and help us to keep) the commandments. These duties are usually quite measurable and are quite familiar. They include partaking of the sacrament, attending meetings and the temple, praying, fasting, studying the scriptures, rendering Christian service, attending to all family duties, being involved in missionary work and reactivation, doing genealogical work, paying our tithes and offerings, and being temporarily prepared.

These enumerated duties, of course, are not particularly glamorous. Yet they are practical and specific expressions of the keeping of the first two great commandments—love of God and love of neighbor. Writing our personal histories and doing genealogical research, for instance, help us to keep the fifth commandment—honoring father and mother. Such efforts would not guarantee courtesy to parents, but they make discourtesy far less likely.

We are thus not merely “cheerleaders” but are “players” on the field of life, for believing takes the form of doing. Indeed, our lives could not truly be Christ-centered if we shunned the chores of the kingdom!

Measurable Duties Produce Highly Desirable but Less Measurable Results

When we perform these measurable duties properly, they produce a series of highly desirable results which are less measurable but very real. Indeed, when we have personal, reinforcing spiritual experiences, they will almost always occur in the course of our carrying out the duties just named. Further, carrying out these duties will entitle us to an ever-increasing companionship of the Holy Ghost. And when we have the Spirit with us, it means we have achieved significant Christocentricity in our lives, for we cannot be close to one member of the Godhead without being close to all three!

... And Help Keep the Spirit Close to Us

It is significant that when President Brigham Young had the experience of having the Prophet Joseph Smith appear to him in February of 1847, President Young asked the Prophet if he had a “message.” The Prophet “very earnestly” said:

Tell the people to be humble and faithful, and be sure to keep the spirit of the Lord and it will lead them
right. Be careful and not turn away the small still voice; it will teach you what to do and where to go; it will yield the fruits of the kingdom. (Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1846–1847, p. 529.)

Of the many things the Prophet might have said, this was his “message.”

Similarly, when President Wilford Woodruff visited with President Brigham Young about two years after the latter’s death, President Woodruff asked President Young if he had a message for the Saints in Arizona. President Young said, “Tell the people to get the Spirit of the Lord and keep it with them.” The content similarity is not surprising, but it is, nevertheless, striking!

Doing right deeds produces right and reassuring feelings, including having the Spirit. President McKay said, for instance, that with spirituality we will have a “consciousness of victory over self”; we will “feel [our] faculties unfolding” and “truth expanding [our] soul,” not unlike the swelling seed analogy in Alma 32. (Treasures of Life, comp. Clair Middlemiss, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1962, p. 437.)

No wonder Alma said it is not enough for us to have once been close to the Savior—so was Sidney Rigdon—and to have “felt to sing the song of redeeming love.” We must ask ourselves, “Can ye feel so now?” (Alma 5:26.) Spirituality is a building thing, not a past or future thing.

Acting, Not Waiting to be Acted Upon

President McKay said further that spirituality “impels one to conquer difficulties”—a leaning into life, not away from it. (Treasures of Life, p. 447.) This fits with what the prophet Nephi [Lehi] said about the importance of acting for ourselves in life and not merely waiting to be acted upon [2 Ne 2:14], and with that soul-shivering verse in Mosiah in which a saint is described as one who is “willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him.” (Mosiah 3:39.) For Jesus’ disciples are sometimes given “thorns in the flesh”—even when there are no rose gardens!

The Christ-centered life produces in us, not a woeful countenance, but a disciplined enthusiasm to work righteousness. We need this, week after week and day after day, for we often meet with and try to help people who “droop in sin.” (2 Ne. 4:28.) The electricity of our enthusiasm for righteousness can brace and lift them. With this enthusiasm for righteousness, we avoid the feeling of being personally plateaued. The specific duties noted earlier help us to avoid staleness. They are like keys on a piano keyboard; touch them correctly and in concert and renewing music is inevitable—if one chord doesn’t lift us, another will!

Learning to Play Chess—Full Submitting to the Will of God

To speak of personal progress and drawing closer to the Savior requires our trusting not only in the Lord’s plan for all mankind but also trusting in his unfolding and particularized plan for each of us. Drawing ever closer to the Lord, therefore, means much more than merely acknowledging that he is in charge, though that is a beginning. Believers who remain underinvolved with Him are, in a sense, living without Him in the world. Alma warned that living without God in the world is “contrary to the nature of happiness.” (Alma 41:11.) In my opinion, that warning was not just for agnostics!

St. Teresa of Avila was vividly correct when she said that for those who live without God in the world, their mortal existence is “no more than a night in a second-class hotel.” (Malcolm Muggeridge, “The Great Liberal Death Wish,” Imprimis, Hillsdale College, Michigan, May 1979.) There is a difference between loving God and merely believing that we ought to love him!

As indicated in the beginning, the test is and always has been, “how much do we love him?” We know how much he loves us. The test he has given us is, “If ye love me, keep my commandments.” (John 14:15.) We may say quite sincerely and even accurately that we are doing reasonably well in this regard. Let us ponder, however, that episode with the decent young man who told the Savior that he too had kept the commandments from his youth. Jesus then gave him an added and very personalized challenge: to go and sell all that he had and give the proceeds to the poor and then “take up the cross, and follow me.” This, said the Savior to the young man, was the “one thing thou lackest.” (Mark 10:21.) In my case, would that it were just one thing, but for you and me, being conscious of that which we yet “lack” becomes an additional test and spur—along with the keeping of the commandments and the performance of our duties. Though we may have already proved we can play checkers,
are we now ready to play chess? Are we willing to let the Lord lead us into further developmental experiences or do we shrink back? There isn’t much growing in shrinking!

Tests of a Christ-centered Life

Following are a dozen tactical tests that can reveal how we are doing in developing the spirituality which follows the Christ-centered life.

1. True spirituality helps us to achieve balance between being too content with our present self and the human tendency we might have of wishing for more significance or enlarged roles.

   Alma said,
   
   “But behold ... I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me.” (Alma 29:3.)

   However, note the often-ignored verse six:
   
   “Now, seeing that I know these things, why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?”

   To develop that kind of justifiable contentment is obviously one of our challenges, particularly so when we seem to be in a “flat” period of life—when we may feel underused, underwhelmed, and underappreciated, even as we ignore unused opportunities for service which are all about us.

2. Are there some Jethros in our lives to give us needed counsel?

   “And Moses’ father in law said unto him, The thing that thou doest is not good.
   
   “Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou, and this people that is with thee: for this thing is too heavy for thee; thou art not able to perform it thyself alone.” (Ex. 18:17–18.)

   Do we have Jethros who can speak to us with that kind of loving directness and yet be received humbly by us? Do we listen “down” and “sideways” as well as “up”?

   “And [Naaman’s] servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?” (2 Kgs. 5:13.)

   Naaman listened to underlings and was lifted up and cleansed.

3. Does a sense of proportion and discernment govern our choices so that our Martha-like anxieties do not make the Mary-like choices less and less likely?

   “And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:
   
   “But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:41–42; see also Luke 38–40.)

   We can be conscientious but confused about our priorities.

   4. Have our personal prayers moved from the easy and casual petitions (like one of Oliver Cowdery’s concerning which the Lord said in Doctrine and Covenants 97, “Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me”) to inspired petitions that the Lord said we could one day approach?

   “And if ye are purified and cleansed from all sin, ye shall ask whatsoever you will in the name of Jesus and it shall be done.
   
   “But know this, it shall be given you what you shall ask.” (D&C 50:29–30.)

   “He that asketh in the Spirit asketh according to the will of God; wherefore it is done even as he asketh.” (D&C 46:30.)

   As the Lord said to a Christ-centered individual in another age:

   “And now, because thou hast done this with such unweariness, behold, I will bless thee forever; and I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works; yea, even that all things shall be done unto thee according to thy word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will.” (Hel. 10:5.)

   5. Do we have both right conduct and right reasons for that conduct? Are we so secure in our relationship with the Lord that our goodness will continue even when our goodness is not seen of men?

   “Take heed that ye do not alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.” (Matt. 6:1.)

   “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” (Rom. 15:1.)

   “Not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.” (Eph. 6:6.)

   6. When, professionally or associationally, we seem to be “put out to pasture,” can we still say gladly and gratefully of the Lord (and mean it), “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures”? (Ps. 23:2.)

   7. When we are misunderstood, misquoted, or misused, do we still love and pray for those who despitefully use us?

   8. When someone seems to surpass us spiritually and does “our thing” even better than we, can we genuinely rejoice and give him heartfelt and sincere praise?

   9. Can we truly remember that forgetting is a specific dimension of forgiving? It is Lord-like—“I...remember [their sins] no more” (D&C 58:42). Do we really help others to get reclassified? How recently have we reclassified someone? Can we, to use Alma’s phrase, “give place” for the spiritual growth of others? Are we truly ready to receive not only the repentant but the frail who have
grown strong? In the city of God, there are lots of “new kids on the block!”

10. Do we trust the Lord enough to use seeming deprivation? To see opportunity within tragedy, as did Joseph anciently? After Jacob’s death, Joseph’s brothers were frightened once again, fearing revenge because of what they had done to Joseph so many years before. Joseph simply said to them, “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.” (Gen. 50:20.) Surely we, among all mankind, should be patient in seeming tragedy, trusting the Lord and doing our duties while things unfold.

11. Are we growing in our patience? The Lord has said of certain challenges:

“These things remain to overcome through patience, that such may receive a more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.” (D&C 63:66.)

Paul stated:

“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.” (Heb. 12:1.)

Life is a marathon, not a hundred yard dash!

12. Finally, are we ready to follow the Lord into soul-stretching experiences, “to move forward,” as President McKay said, “to conquer our difficulties” even if it means having experiences which will teach us through suffering? In a stunning declaration, Alma spoke of Jesus and his atonement and of how even the Savior learned certain things “according to the flesh”:

“And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sufferings of his people.

“And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon them their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.” (Alma 7:11–12.)

Jesus, being sinless, could not have known suffering caused by his own sin—but the agonies of the Atonement made it possible for Christ to succor us in our infirmities!

You and I may also need to suffer and undergo certain experiences “according to the flesh” in order to increase our capacity to help other people, bringing experiences we may not want, but which the Lord in his wisdom may insist upon.

In this connection I read from a sobering, sweet letter written by a gallant, modest young man now at BYU:

“I have now had leukemia diagnosed for fifteen months, although few people even know about it. My goal has been to lead as normal a life as is possible; hence, the subject rarely gets mentioned because most people I have encountered, doctors included, tend to treat it as a tragedy rather than as an incentive to get one’s affairs in order promptly.

“My parents took the news quite hard, perhaps because my brother died unexpectedly eleven years ago of undiagnosed causes. Most are pessimistic; however, I have failed to see how pessimism would help me make the best use of my time which is of an unknown length, not only for me, but for everyone.

“Against medical and parental advice, I have since gotten married and am finishing my first year at BYU and we’re expecting a baby in July. I feel great and am truly enjoying the blessings that are coming from being married in the temple, studying the scriptures, working hard in school, and living each day rather than simply waiting to die as some would recommend.

“Fifteen months ago, my then fiancée and I thought that if I could live long enough just for us to be sealed, that was all we would ask for. Therefore, we consider everything since then a great gift from the Lord. We still dream and plan for a long family life together, and it gives to us a certain comfort to know that our situation is in the Lord’s hands and is not bound by man’s limitations.”

A Greater Spiritual Potential

Let me speak of faith and of far more potential spirituality than we may realize we have.

A. In spite of what the world declares, there is still only one way to find ourselves and that is by losing our lives for the sake of the Savior and the gospel. (See Mark 8:35.) Only then do we find ourselves. The emptiest people I know are those in the world who are seeking selfish fulfillment! They will never find it on those terms.

B. We must learn to rejoice in the many blessings we now have without brooding over those that are temporarily withheld from us. What we do not have must not be allowed to spoil what we do have.

C. We need to remember that in the ecology of temptation, if we fall we usually do not fall alone. Likewise, if we resist temptation, we may thereby strengthen another unknowingly.

In writing about the city of Enoch a few years ago, I had a character in the story say in a letter to a friend:

“Not only do we gain greater happiness ourselves when we are righteous, but we also help our neighbor in subtle ways. How often the weaknesses in one man become a temptation to another man! My desire for wealth and gems can cause another man’s envy; my temper has, at times past, dissolved your patience. One man’s incontinence destroys what little is left of a righteous woman’s resolve. One person’s lust becomes another’s way to wealth. A man’s drunkenness becomes another man’s excuse for Sabbath-breaking to enlarge his vineyards.”

(Neal A. Maxwell, Of One Heart, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975, p. 28.)

D. With regard to the matter of regular, personal improvement in our lives, if we lack an agendum, we need merely consult our conscience. We should not take on
too many projects all at once, however, lest we fail in all of them. It is better to concentrate on betterment in the basics—even if the pace seems somewhat slow. Our success will increase our self-esteem and our capacity to love and to help others.

E. When we are called upon to pass through fiery trials, let the sobering and yet encouraging words of Peter wash over us like surf—

"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you" (1 Pet. 4:12)—remembering that you will not always know when you are passing through trials what the final and full purposes of such soul-stretching experiences are.

"And now, I, Moroni would speak somewhat concerning these things ... dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith." (Ether 12:6.)

We can be assured, however, when recalling how some other young disciples were tested in the fiery furnace years ago (Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego), that the Lord did not let them pass through that test alone. When King Nebuchadnezzar looked into the fiery furnace, he saw a fourth figure “and the form of the fourth [was] like the Son of God." (Dan. 3:25.) The Lord will not let us suffer alone but will be close to us as we pass through these soul-stretching experiences.

F. The world is too much with us—subtly and even militantly—trying to persuade us all to move away from Christ, to let go of the iron rod—to give in and be like all others. How important it is to keep the precious perspective of the gospel! Said Malcolm Muggeridge:

“When I look back on my life nowadays, which I sometimes do, what strikes me most forcibly about it is that what seemed at the time most significant and seductive, seems now most futile and absurd. For instance, success in all of its various guises: being known and being praised; ostensible pleasures, like acquiring money or seducing women, or travelling, going to and fro in the world and up and down in it like Satan, exploring and experiencing whatever Vanity Fair has to offer.

“In retrospect all these exercises in self-gratification seem pure fantasy, what Pascal called ‘licking the earth.’ They are diversions designed to distract our attention from the true purpose of our existence in this world, which is, quite simply, to look for God, and, in looking, to find Him, and, having found Him, to love Him, thereby establishing a harmonious relationship with His purposes for His creation.” (A Twentieth Century Testimony, by Malcolm Muggeridge.)

How grateful we should be for the opportunity to learn while young what Muggeridge learned! The earlier the world is renounced, the more chance to better the world—and the sooner we will touch other lives happily. The idea is to replenish the earth, not “lick it.” The duties noted will keep us too busy to attend Vanity Fair.

One day it will all be very clear to us; we will see the absurdity of some of our choices and wonder, again and again, why it was that, given the simpleness as well as the truthfulness of the gospel, so many refused to accept it. Or why some members did not stay with it. Ironically, the very simpleness and the easiness of the way causes some to refuse to look to God and live. (See 1 Ne. 17:41.)

G. We must resist the caresses of the world, knowing that insofar as we are already resisting these caresses, these blandishments of Babylon, we are succeeding! Moreover, we are doing so in a time of tremendous temptation, a time when the adversary seeks to blur the distinction between what Ezekiel called “the holy and [the] profane.” (Ezek. 44:23.)

For those of us who continue steadily in that course, the day will come when we will meet our ancestors and predecessor disciples; they will praise us for our achievements and for our courage—just as we have often praised them for meeting their individual challenges.

The Lord is preparing a very particular people for very particular chores in the next and everlasting world. Our schooling here cannot be a casual thing, or we would not be able to have immense joy there. One day, some of the challenges, the imponderables, and the incongruities that chafe and frustrate us now (and which are sufficient to deflect the weak from the path of duty) will be seen as having been necessary to our eternal happiness. Then we will even find ourselves thanking the Lord for not removing the thorns in the flesh which we wish so desperately could be removed now. Those who have coped with thorns in the flesh will one day repose in an everlasting rose garden; this rose garden was promised!

God bless us all, meanwhile, as we make our way, righteously and resolutely, to that garden in the city of God! The gatekeeper is Jesus Christ—and “he employeth no servant there” (2 Ne. 9:41); if we come to know him now, he will know us then!