

Personal Purity Jeffrey R. Holland CR November 1998

As modern winds of immorality swirl luridly around them, I am concerned for any of our youth or young adults who may be confused about principles of personal purity, about obligations of total chastity before marriage and complete fidelity after it. Against what is happening in the world they see and hear, and hoping to fortify parents as they teach their children a higher standard, I wish to speak today about moral cleanliness. Because this subject is as sacred as any I know, I earnestly pray for the Holy Spirit to guide me in remarks that are more candid than I would wish to make. Today I know how Jacob in the Book of Mormon felt when he said on the same topic, “It grieveth me that I must use so much boldness of speech.”¹

In approaching this subject I do not document a host of social ills for which the statistics are as grim as the examples are offensive. Nor will I present here a checklist of do’s and don’ts about dating and boy-girl relationships. What I wish to do is more personal—I wish to try to answer questions some of you may have been asking: *Why* should we be morally clean? *Why* is it such an important issue to God? Does the Church *have* to be so strict about it when others don’t seem to be? How could anything society exploits and glamorizes so openly be very sacred or serious?

May I begin with a lesson from civilization’s long, instructive story. Will and Ariel Durant have written: “No man [or woman], however brilliant or well-informed, can ... safely ... dismiss ... the wisdom of [lessons learned] in the laboratory of history. A youth boiling with hormones will wonder why he should not give full freedom to his sexual desires; [but] if he is unchecked by custom, morals, or laws, he may ruin his life before he ... understand[s] that sex is a river of fire that must be banked and cooled by a hundred restraints if it is not to consume in chaos both the individual and the group.”²

A more important scriptural observation is offered by the writer of Proverbs: “Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Can one go upon hot coals, and his feet not be burned? ... Whoso committeth adultery ... destroyeth his own soul. A wound and dishonour shall he get; and his reproach shall not be wiped away.”³

Why is this matter of sexual relationships so severe that fire is almost always the metaphor, with passion pictured vividly in flames? What is there in the potentially hurtful heat of this that leaves one’s soul—or the whole world, for that matter—destroyed if that flame is left unchecked and those passions unrestrained? What is there in all of this that prompts Alma to warn his son Corianton that sexual transgression is “an abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost?”⁴

By assigning such seriousness to a physical appetite so universally bestowed, what is God trying to tell us about its place in His plan for all men and women? I submit to you He is doing precisely that—commenting about the very plan of life itself. Clearly among His greatest concerns regarding mortality are how one gets into this world and how one gets out of it. He has set very strict limits in these matters.

Fortunately, in the case of how life is terminated, most seem to be quite responsible. But in the significance of *giving* life, we sometimes find near-criminal irresponsibility. May I offer three reasons why this is an issue of such magnitude and consequence in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

First is the revealed, restored doctrine of the human soul.

One of the “plain and precious” truths restored in this dispensation is that “the spirit and the body are the soul of man”⁵ and that when the spirit and body are separated, men and women “cannot receive a fulness of joy.”⁶ That is the reason why obtaining a body is so fundamentally important in the first place, why sin of any kind is such a serious matter (namely because it is sin that ultimately brings both physical and spiritual death), and why the resurrection of the body is so central to the great triumph of Christ’s Atonement.

The body is an essential part of the soul. This distinctive and very important Latter-day Saint doctrine underscores why sexual sin is so serious. We declare that one who uses the God-given body of another without divine sanction abuses the very soul of that individual, abuses the central purpose and processes of life, “the very key”⁷ to life, as

President Boyd K. Packer once called it. In exploiting the body of another—which means exploiting his or her soul—one desecrates the Atonement of Christ, which saved that soul and which makes possible the gift of eternal life. And when one mocks the Son of Righteousness, one steps into a realm of heat hotter and holier than the noonday sun. You cannot do so and not be burned.

Please, never say: “Who does it hurt? Why not a little freedom? I can transgress now and repent later.” Please don’t be so foolish and so cruel. You cannot with impunity “crucify Christ afresh.”⁸ “Flee fornication,”⁹ Paul cries, and flee “*anything like unto it*,”¹⁰ the Doctrine and Covenants adds. Why? Well, for one reason because of the incalculable suffering in both body and spirit endured by the Savior of the world so that we *could* flee.¹¹ We owe Him something for that. Indeed, we owe Him everything for that. “Ye are not your own,” Paul says. “Ye [have been] bought with a price: therefore *glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s*.”¹² In sexual transgression the soul is at stake—the body and the spirit.

Secondly, may I stress that human intimacy is reserved for a married couple because it is the ultimate symbol of total union, a totality and a union ordained and defined by God. From the Garden of Eden onward, marriage was intended to mean the complete merger of a man and a woman—their hearts, hopes, lives, love, family, future, everything. Adam said of Eve that she was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh, and that they were to be “one flesh” in their life together.¹³ This is a union of such completeness that we use the word *seal* to convey its eternal promise. The Prophet Joseph Smith once said we perhaps could render such a sacred bond as being “welded”¹⁴ one to another.

But such a total union, such an unyielding commitment between a man and a woman, can only come with the proximity and permanence afforded in a marriage covenant, with solemn promises and the pledge of all they possess—their very hearts and minds, all their days and all their dreams.

Can you see the moral schizophrenia that comes from *pretending* you are one, pretending you have made solemn promises before God, sharing the physical symbols and the physical intimacy of your counterfeit union but then fleeing, retreating, severing all such other aspects of what was meant to be a total obligation?

In matters of human intimacy, you must wait! You must wait until you can give everything, and you cannot give everything until you are legally and lawfully married. To give illicitly that which is not yours to give (remember, “you are not your own”) and to give only part of that which cannot be followed with the gift of your whole self is emotional Russian roulette. If you persist in pursuing physical satisfaction without the sanction of heaven, you run the terrible risk of such spiritual, psychic damage that you may undermine *both* your longing for physical intimacy *and* your ability to give wholehearted devotion to a later, truer love. You may come to that truer moment of ordained love, of real union, only to discover to your horror that what you should have saved you have spent, and that only God’s grace can recover the piecemeal dissipation of the virtue you so casually gave away. On your wedding day the very best gift you can give your eternal companion is your very best self—clean and pure and worthy of such purity in return.

Thirdly, may I say that physical intimacy is not only a symbolic union between a husband and a wife—the very uniting of their souls—but it is also symbolic of a shared relationship between them and their Father in Heaven. He is immortal and perfect. We are mortal and imperfect. Nevertheless we seek ways even in mortality whereby we can unite with Him spiritually. In so doing we gain some access to both the grace and the majesty of His power. Those special moments include kneeling at a marriage altar in the house of the Lord, blessing a newborn baby, baptizing and confirming a new member of the Church, partaking of the emblems of the Lord’s Supper, and so forth.

These are moments when we quite literally unite our will with God’s will, our spirit with His spirit, where communion through the veil becomes very real. At such moments we not only acknowledge His divinity but we quite literally take something of that divinity to ourselves. One aspect of that divinity given to virtually all men and women is the use of His power to create a human body, that wonder of all wonders, a genetically and spiritually unique being never before seen in the history of the world and never to be duplicated again in all the ages of eternity. A child, your child—with eyes and ears and fingers and toes and a future of unspeakable grandeur.

Probably only a parent who has held that newborn infant in his or her arms understands the wonder of which I speak. Suffice it to say that of all the titles God has chosen for Himself, *Father* is the one He favors most, and *creation* is His watchword—especially human creation, creation in His image. You and I have been given something of that godliness, *but under the most serious and sacred of restrictions. The only control placed on us is self-control*—self-control born of respect for the divine sacramental power this gift represents.

My beloved friends, especially my young friends, can you see why personal purity is such a serious matter? Can you understand why the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles would issue a proclamation declaring that “the means by which mortal life is created [is] divinely appointed” and that “the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife”?¹⁵ Don’t be deceived and don’t be destroyed. Unless such powers are controlled and commandments kept, your future may be burned; your world could go up in flames. Penalty may not come on the precise day of transgression, but it comes surely and certainly enough. And unless there is true repentance and obedience to a merciful God, then someday, somewhere, the morally cavalier and unclean will pray like the rich man who wished Lazarus to “dip ... his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.”¹⁶

I have declared here the solemn word of revelation that the spirit and the body constitute the soul of man, and that through the Atonement of Christ the body shall rise from the grave to unite with the spirit in an eternal existence. That body is therefore something to be kept pure and holy. Do not be afraid of soiling its hands in honest labor. Do not be afraid of scars that may come in defending the truth or fighting for the right, but beware scars that spiritually disfigure, that come to you in activities you should not have undertaken, that befall you in places where you should not have gone. Beware the wounds of any battle in which you have been fighting on the wrong side.¹⁷

If some few of you are carrying such wounds—and I know that you are—to you is extended the peace and renewal of repentance available through the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. In such serious matters the path of repentance is not easily begun nor painlessly traveled. But the Savior of the world will walk that essential journey with you. He will strengthen you when you waver. He will be your light when it seems most dark. He will take your hand and be your hope when hope seems all you have left. His compassion and mercy, with all their cleansing and healing power, are freely given to all who truly wish complete forgiveness and will take the steps that lead to it.

I bear witness of the great plan of life, of the powers of godliness, of mercy and forgiveness and the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ—all of which have profound meaning in matters of moral cleanliness. I testify that we are to glorify God in our body and in our spirit. I thank heaven for legions of the young who are doing just that and helping others do the same. I thank heaven for homes where this is taught. That lives of personal purity may be revered by all, I pray in the name of purity Himself, even the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.