

## **Reaping the Rewards of Righteousness** **Quentin L. Cook, *Ensign*, July 2015**

The world is literally in commotion (see D&C 45:26). Many of our challenges are in the spiritual realm. They are societal issues we as individuals cannot necessarily resolve. Nevertheless, there are practical rewards we can achieve as individuals, even at a time when righteousness across the world is in decline.

The very idea of “rewards of righteousness” is a concept that is under siege in today’s world. Convincing people to choose righteousness is an age-old challenge. “The natural man is an enemy to God” (Mosiah 3:19). There has always been “opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11).

The difference today is that the “great and spacious building” (1 Nephi 8:31) skeptics are louder, more contentious, and less tolerant than at any time during my life. They evidence their diminished faith when, on many issues, they are more concerned with being on the wrong side of history than on the wrong side of God. There was a time when the vast majority of people understood that they would be judged by God’s commandments, not by the prevailing views or dominant philosophies of the day. Some are more concerned about being mocked by others than they are about being judged by God.

The battle between good and evil is not new. But today a much higher percentage of people mistakenly concludes that there is not a moral, righteous standard to which all people should adhere.

Nevertheless, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has never had more faithful members. Members of the Church, together with others who have similar moral values, represent an island of faith in a sea of doubt and disbelief. We know, as the prophet Alma declared, that “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10) and that the Father’s plan for His children is a “plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8, 16).

My desire is to offer some suggestions that may help you individually and your families collectively to better understand and achieve the rewards of righteousness.

### **The Reward of Spirituality**

*“How do I put material concerns in proper perspective as I attempt to achieve spiritual progress?”*

We are so much a part of this world. The material aspects of day-to-day living are a specific challenge. Society tends to look at everything through the lens of worldly rewards.

The preface to the Doctrine and Covenants highlights this very problem to warn us of dangers, give us guidance to prepare and protect ourselves now and in the future, and provide significant insight on this subject: “They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol” (see D&C 1:16).

President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) taught that idols can include credentials, degrees, property, homes, furnishings, and other material objects. He said that when we elevate these otherwise worthy objectives in a way that diminishes our worship of the Lord and weakens our efforts to establish His righteousness and perform the work of salvation among Father in Heaven’s children, we have created idols.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes the lens of the world causes us to focus on issues not quite as dramatic as aspiring to great wealth but that nonetheless take us away from deep spiritual commitment.

Many years ago I was made aware of an interesting display that had several unique scenes. The different scenes appeared underneath a large banner that read, “If Christ came tonight, to whom would He come?” If I remember the depictions correctly, they contained the following scenes:

- An ill, elderly woman in bed being attended by a nurse.
- A joyful young mother with a newborn baby.
- A family with hungry, crying children.
- A wealthy family.
- A sweet but humble family with many children joyously singing together.

We know that when the Savior comes again, we will not know the day or the hour. We also know that as Christians, we care for the poor and the needy and for the widow and the orphan. Nevertheless, the banner would have been more accurate had it read, “If Christ came tonight, who would be prepared to greet Him?”

My second thought was that the scenes told us everything about the physical condition of the people but nothing about their spiritual condition and commitment to Christ.

The starting point for reviewing our life and commitment to the Savior and His gospel is baptism. Except for new converts and the very young, our baptisms occurred years ago.

The great prophet Alma speaks eloquently to us when he states: “And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren, if ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?” (Alma 5:26).

Alma then continues with his profound message, which is relevant to our day. He essentially asks the Saints, were they to die, if they would be prepared to meet God. Alma then emphasizes four qualities we need in order to be blameless before God:

First, “have [we] been sufficiently humble?” In a sense, this is a return to the requirement for baptism—humbling ourselves and having broken hearts and contrite spirits.

Second, “are [we] stripped of pride?” Alma warns against trampling the Holy One under our feet and being puffed up in pride—setting our hearts upon the vain things of the world and supposing we are better than others.

Third, are we “stripped of envy?” For those who have great blessings but do not feel gratitude because they focus only on what others have, envy can be most pernicious. “Lifestyle envy”<sup>2</sup> has increased as fame and fortune have replaced faith and family as core aspirations for much of society.

Fourth, do we mock or persecute our brothers and sisters? In today’s world we would probably call this bullying (see Alma 5:27–30, 53–54).

Could anything be more relevant to the issues of our own day than this message about humility, pride, envy, and persecution? The great debate across much of the world is about temporal day-to-day economic issues. Yet there is little discussion about returning to Christlike principles focused on preparation to meet God and on the condition of our spirits. We need to focus our lives and increase our emphasis on spiritual matters.

### **The Reward of Righteous Families**

“Should we be raising our families in areas where there are few members of the Church and we are surrounded by much evil, contention, and opposition to righteousness?”

My wife, Mary, and I had these concerns as we were beginning to raise our children in the San Francisco Bay Area in California, USA, in the late 1960s. The Latter-day Saint population was relatively small. But while the vast majority of people were wonderful, the Bay Area had become a magnet for drug usage and all manner of promiscuous and sinful conduct.

The change in society was significant enough that a concerned stake president asked the leadership of the Church if he should encourage Church members to remain in the Bay Area. Elder Harold B. Lee (1899–1973), then a senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, was assigned to address the issue. He explained that the Lord had not inspired the construction of a temple in our area only to have the members leave. His counsel to us was simple but profound:

1. Create Zion in our hearts and homes.
2. Be a light to those among whom we live.
3. Focus on the ordinances of the temple and the principles taught there.

We cherished Elder Lee’s counsel and tried to follow it in our family.

In building Zion in our hearts and homes, we need to emphasize religious observance in the home by having daily family prayer and scripture study and by holding weekly family home evening. In this context we can teach and train our children. We do this with love and kindness, avoiding undue criticism of our children and our spouse.

Regardless of where we live and even if we do everything right, some children may make unwise choices that lead to forbidden paths. Accordingly, it is important to help our young people determine in advance what they will say or do when others propose improper or immoral conduct.

Our children attended schools where there were only two or three LDS children. At the beginning of each school year and before school activities, we discussed in family home evening appropriate responses if they found themselves in compromising situations. We asked them what they would say to friends who might tell them, “Don’t be silly; everyone does it,” “Your parents won’t know,” or “Just once won’t matter.”

We talked about our accountability to the Lord.

We pointed out that we follow Christ’s example when we dress modestly, use clean and appropriate language, and avoid pornography, which now needs to be taught to Primary-age children so that they can have pure lives.

We talked about Joseph of Egypt, who fled when confronted with inappropriate attention from Potiphar’s wife (see Genesis 39:7–12).

Each of our children had at least one experience in which this preparation was essential, but most of the time their

friends protected them because they knew their standards and beliefs.

When our daughter, Kathryn, called her mother after going away to college, Mary would tell her things she loved about the Savior. Mary constantly used His example and character to help with the problem Kathryn had called to discuss.

I believe we can raise righteous children in almost any part of the world if they have a firm foundation in Jesus Christ and His gospel. Nephi described teaching his family and people, saying, “We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:26).

If we do this, when our children make unwise choices, they will know that all is not lost and that they can find their way home. I want to assure you that you and your family will be blessed as you strive to strengthen each member of your family through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

If we follow Elder Lee’s counsel to be a light to those among whom we live, we cannot be in camouflage as to who we are. Our conduct should reflect our values and beliefs. Where appropriate, we should participate in the public square.

Living worthy of a temple recommend, receiving temple ordinances, and being true to our covenants gives us the focus and vision to stay on the covenant path. When our youth live worthy to perform baptisms for the dead, their lives will be in order.

We need to focus our energy on strengthening our families by talking, rejoicing, preaching, and prophesying of Christ so that we may enjoy the reward of righteous families and become eternal families.

For those who are single but living righteous lives, our doctrine is reassuring: “Faithful members whose circumstances do not allow them to receive the blessings of eternal marriage and parenthood in this life will receive all promised blessings in the eternities, provided they keep the covenants they have made with God.”<sup>3</sup>

### **The Reward of Happiness**

*“What advantages should I provide for my children to be happy and successful in life?”*

Lucifer has created a counterfeit or illusion of happiness that is inconsistent with righteousness and will mislead us if we are not vigilant. Many of our problems today occur because the secular world has been pursuing an

incorrect definition of happiness. We know from the Book of Mormon that this problem has existed throughout all generations. We also know the blessings that come from living the commandments.

King Benjamin states, “I would desire that ye should consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God. For behold, they are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual; and if they hold out faithful to the end they are received into heaven, that thereby they may dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness. O remember, remember that these things are true; for the Lord God hath spoken it” (Mosiah 2:41).

Over many years I have followed a research project that commenced in the 1930s. Initially, the study involved 268 men at a premier university who were periodically studied over their entire lives. Later, women became part of the study. The study covered approximately 70 years. The goal of the original study was to find out as much as possible about success and happiness.

The study showed that college entrance scores and grade averages did not predict either success or happiness in later life. But one area where there was a high correlation was childhood family happiness. Happy, successful adults usually reported that their mother in particular verbally expressed love and affection and did not use severe discipline. Both of their parents were demonstratively affectionate with each other and available and accessible to their children, with whom they had warm and emotionally expressive relationships. The parents created a stable family environment and were believed to have respected the autonomy of their children.

A concluding book on the study published in 2012 reports: “Many measures of success throughout life are predicted less reliably by early financial and social advantage than by a loved and loving childhood.” A warm childhood correlates with achievement more than intelligence, social class, or athleticism. The study also found that “what goes right in childhood predicts the future far better than what goes wrong.”<sup>4</sup>

The study as a whole indicates that even when there are significant challenges and some things go very wrong, most children are resilient, and the trust that is built by loving relationships with parents, especially the mother, can result in lasting, lifetime happiness. What was interesting to me, but not surprising, was that the study was completely in line with what the scriptures and the Church teach about the family. The Church emphasizes family home evening, family prayer, expressions of love, family togetherness, and family traditions, which are the very kinds of activities that the study indicated would produce happy, successful adults.

Nephi begins the Book of Mormon expressing gratitude for “goodly parents” (1 Nephi 1:1), but the real lesson is that we each determine what kind of parent we will be so that our posterity can happily report that they too were born of goodly parents.

The most important thing you can do is to make sure your children and those you nurture know that you love them. Love is the key ingredient to happiness.

### **The Reward of Prospering in the Land**

*“Our family is not achieving significant material success. Is that because we are not righteous enough?”*

The scriptures are clear that living the commandments allows us to prosper in the land. But let me assure you that prospering in the land is not defined by the size of your bank account. It has a much fuller meaning than that.

Speaking to his son Helaman, the prophet Alma teaches, “Inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land; and ye ought to know also, that inasmuch as ye will not keep the commandments of God ye shall be cut off from his presence” (Alma 36:30).

Accordingly, having the Spirit in our lives is the primary ingredient in prospering in the land. If we keep the commandments, we also have certain specific promises (see Ephesians 6:1–3). Doctrine and Covenants section 89, for example, promises that by living the Word of Wisdom, we will enjoy health blessings and great treasures of knowledge.

Isolating one element of the Word of Wisdom, avoiding alcohol, is instructional. The longitudinal study I mentioned earlier found that alcohol abuse touches one American family in three, is involved in a quarter of all admissions to general hospitals, and plays a major role in death, divorce, bad health, and diminished accomplishment.

A long-term study of active Church members in California found that women live on average 5.6 years and men 9.8 years longer than comparable U.S. females

and males. The physicians conducting the study indicated at least one reason was adherence to the Word of Wisdom. Living the Word of Wisdom allows us to prosper in the land.<sup>5</sup>

In a conversation I had with President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) on a flight to a temple dedication, he joyfully reported that the Church had funds to increase the number of temples because Latter-day Saints had prospered in the land. As faithful tithe payers, they had provided the resources to build temples.

Prospering and being wealthy are not necessarily synonymous. A much better gospel definition of prospering in the land is having sufficient for our needs while having the abundant blessing of the Spirit in our lives. When we provide for our families and love and serve the Savior, we will enjoy the reward of having the Spirit and prospering in the land.

### **The Reward of Peace**

The ultimate promised reward of righteousness is set forth clearly in Doctrine and Covenants 59:23: “But learn that he [or she] who doeth the works of righteousness shall receive his [or her] reward, even peace in this world, and eternal life in the world to come.”

More than 35 years ago, President Kimball taught that major growth would occur in the Church because many “good women ... will be drawn to the Church in large numbers.” He declared, “This will happen to the degree that the women of the Church reflect righteousness and articulateness in their lives and ... are seen as distinct and different—in happy ways—from the women of the world.”<sup>6</sup>

This has truly happened and will continue to do so in the future.

The Lord God is indeed a sun and shield and will give grace and glory. No good thing will be withheld from them that walk uprightly (see Psalm 84:11). My prayer is that you may reap the rewards of righteousness as you faithfully follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.