

An Outward Expression of an Inward Commitment

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At April general conference I looked around as the Conference Center filled with twenty-one thousand people. I was impressed by how good they looked—they were cleaned up, covered up, and well behaved, no one's appearance screaming for attention, no loud strident voices or profane language, just decency, modesty, and cheerfulness. From what we generally see in the world, one might think a modest person is a lone voice crying in the wilderness, but here were twenty-one thousand—and, with each succeeding session, twenty-one thousand more until there were one hundred thousand—all great examples of modesty in its complete sense.

What is modesty in its complete sense? The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* defines modesty as “a quality of mind, heart, and body, modesty is an attitude of humility, decency, and propriety that may be evidenced in thought, language, dress, and behavior. Modesty or immodesty is reflected in almost every aspect of human life.”¹

Our prophet President Gordon B. Hinckley, in his book *Stand a Little Taller*, said this: “Of all the creations of the Almighty, there is none more beautiful, none more inspiring than a lovely daughter of God who walks in virtue, with an understanding of why she should do so, who honors and respects her body as a thing sacred and divine, who cultivates her mind and

constantly enlarges the horizon of her understanding, who nurtures her spirit with everlasting truth.”²

You will notice he did not say she walks in virtue, period. He said, “she walks in virtue with an understanding of why she should do so.” It is not enough to be modest; we need to understand why. What is the why of modesty? Where do we look to obtain the knowledge to honor and respect our bodies as sacred and divine?

Why is our view of modesty different from that of the world? Most of the world does not have the truths that came in the restoration of the gospel, nor have they made the commitments that we have made. Let’s look at the truths we know about a mortal body, the value of a soul, and the level of our commitments.

Many people in the world think the spirit is good but the body is basically evil. What truths show us that the body is sacred and divine? In Genesis 1:27 we are told, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” Thus we see our body is of heavenly design with a purpose planned by God.

We know that after resurrection our spirit will be reunited with our body and become an immortal soul. Many people in the world, if they even believe in a life after death, think we will be just a spirit. Our knowledge that we will have a body at resurrection reinforces the high value we place on our body. We are fortunate that we have the Book of Mormon that teaches about the resurrection with clarity.

We Know Why We Need a Body

We know that God’s plan requires our spirit to experience a mortal body in order to progress. We need to learn to live the commandments in a mortal body with its hormones, pains, illnesses, and the trials and temptations of a mortal world. Only with a mortal body do we have the power of procreation.

We Know It Is a Privilege to Receive a Body

Only two-thirds of the spirits in the premortal existence will have an opportunity to have a mortal body. One-third of the spirits in heaven rebelled against God and His plan and so were cast out, never to have the opportunity to have a mortal body. Doctrine and Covenants 29:36–37 describes it this way: “And it came to pass that Adam, being tempted of the devil—for, behold, the devil was before Adam, for he rebelled against me, saying, Give me thine honor, which is my

power; and also a third part of the hosts of heaven turned he away from me because of their agency; And they were thrust down, and thus came the devil and his angels.”

What is the goal of the devil and his followers today? In 2 Nephi 2:17–18 we are taught: “And I, Lehi, according to the things which I have read, must needs suppose that an angel of God, according to that which is written, had fallen from heaven; wherefore, he became a devil, having sought that which was evil before God. And because he had fallen from heaven, and had become miserable forever, he sought also the misery of all mankind.”

So we see that starting with Adam and continuing to our day, the devil seeks the misery of all mankind and tries to influence us to join him in his rebellion against God. Unfortunately, he has been very successful.

We Know Modesty Was Taught from the Beginning

After a lesson in Relief Society on modesty, a sister asked if modesty was an American concept or a gospel concept. We need to know it is a gospel concept and always has been, right from the beginning. Do you recall that Genesis 3:21 says, “Unto Adam and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them.” Was He concerned about the neighbors or children? No, there weren’t any. He clothed them because He wanted them clothed and protected.

That same concept continues today. The Lord values the mortal body and even gave specific instructions about its care in our day. Because of conditions that exist today, in Doctrine and Covenants 89 He warned us against addictive things that would hurt our agency. He also counseled us to nourish this body with fruits, vegetables, and grains, and to use meat sparingly, showing His concern for it. He wants us to value this gift of a body and keep it clothed, nourished, and protected.

We Know How the Lord Values a Soul

Now, looking at the body combined with the spirit, we have a mortal soul. So, talking about the soul in that sense, how much does the Lord value a soul? Doctrine and Covenants 18:10 says, “Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God.” In verse 13 we read, “And how great is his joy in the soul that repenteth!” Then, in verse 15, “And if it so be that ye should labor all your days in crying repentance unto this people, and bring, save it be one soul unto me, how great shall be your joy with him in the kingdom of my father!”

I often think God loves us more than we love ourselves. We get discouraged when we see our weaknesses, and we may not feel very valuable, but the Lord knows our potential. He knows we did not join in Satan's rebellion in heaven but remained faithful. We have come here according to God's plan. He gives us commandments, knowing we may struggle to master some of them, yet gaining that mastery is the purpose of coming. He does not give up on us when we do wrong but has provided a plan of repentance so we can move forward. When some are not living the gospel, God still cares about them. We know this because the scriptures show us how He sends His believers to teach them. Even when He knows the afflictions the believers will suffer, He still sends them so that the unbelievers may have the opportunity to hear the gospel and have the choice to accept or reject it. An example of this is found in Alma 26. Ammon is speaking:

“Now do you remember, my brethren, that we said unto our brethren in the land of Zarahemla, we go up to the land of Nephi, to preach unto our brethren, the Lamanites, and they laughed us to scorn?

“But behold, my beloved brethren, we came into the wilderness not with the intent to destroy our brethren, but with the intent that perhaps we might save some few of their souls.

“Now when our hearts were depressed, and we were about to turn back, behold, the Lord comforted us, and said: Go amongst thy brethren, the Lamanites, and bear with patience thine afflictions, and I will give unto you success.

“And we have entered into their houses and taught them, and we have taught them in their streets; yea, and we have taught them upon their hills; and we have also entered into their temples and their synagogues and taught them; and we have been cast out, and mocked, and spit upon, and smote upon our cheeks; and we have been stoned, and taken and bound with strong cords, and cast into prison; and through the power and wisdom of God we have been delivered again.

“And we have suffered all manner of afflictions, and all this, that perhaps we might be the means of saving some soul; and we supposed that our joy would be full if perhaps we could be the means of saving some.

“Now my brethren, we see that God is mindful of every people, whatsoever land they may be in; yea, he numbereth his people, and his bowels of mercy are over all the earth” (Alma 26:23, 26–27, 29–30, 37).

Now, they suffered some painful afflictions, and the Lord knew they would. The Lord loved Ammon, but it was worth his afflictions to save the souls of the unbelievers.

Every soul is valuable to the Lord—so valuable that God sent His Son to redeem them. When His Son, whom He loved, asked if this cup might pass but also said, “Thy will, not mine, be done,” God let the Atonement go forward to save our souls. He loves His Son, and He also loves us. How can we stay focused on that knowledge when we are living in a world so full of distractions and temptations?

Baptism and Confirmation Gives Us the Gift of the Holy Ghost

We make sacred covenants that help us to stay focused. We make a baptismal covenant that through faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost, our sins can be forgiven and we can become members of His kingdom. Most do not have a complete understanding of the gospel at this point, but by living the commandments and with the help of the Holy Ghost, over time we find that our understanding deepens.

We know the necessity of this ordinance because Jesus Christ Himself was baptized to fulfill this requirement and show His obedience to His Father. This covenant is so important that we renew it every Sunday with the sacrament. Through the sacrament prayers, we renew our commitment to take His name upon us, to always remember Him, and to keep His commandments. Then, we are promised we can have His Spirit to be with us.

Why the need to be reminded so frequently—every Sunday? Perhaps because the distractions and temptations of the world are so relentless. When someone is baptized, all of the person is baptized, not just half. In fact, if only a toe comes out of the water, the baptism has to be performed over again. It does not work to be part in the world and part in the kingdom, not even a toe’s worth. To covenant to always remember means under any and all circumstances.

Temple Covenants Bring More Knowledge and More Commitment

As we grow in faith and testimony, we become eligible to go to the temple. There we receive greater knowledge, which increases our appreciation and reverence for our mortal body.

Our temple covenants are of such value that the Lord required the Saints in Nauvoo to build a temple despite their poverty and persecution. In spite of these hardships they built the temple using the best craftsmanship available with every detail as fine as they could make it. They built it knowing that, after receiving their temple covenants, they would have to leave their

temple behind and move west. Their enemies must have thought it strange that the Saints would devote such effort to build their temple when they knew they were going to leave. The persecutors may have thought that it was all in vain as they drove the Saints out of Nauvoo, but they did not understand or appreciate the value of the temple covenants. The Lord knew what the Saints had been through and what lay ahead of them. He wanted the Saints to receive the blessings of the temple and to know that those blessings were worth every sacrifice.

Some years ago, before the Berlin Wall came down, East Germany was in my husband's area of responsibility. Many times we traveled into East Germany through Checkpoint Charlie, past the barbed wire, the search dogs, and the guards armed with machine guns to visit the Saints and hold district conferences. The Saints there had remained faithful for many years despite very difficult circumstances. Although they had no temple and no patriarch, they never forgot that in a meeting in Görlitz in 1968, Elder Thomas S. Monson, as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, promised them that they would have all the blessings of the gospel if they remained faithful.³ After years of faithfully living the gospel, the Saints were granted permission by their government to build a temple. That was in 1983, six years before the Berlin Wall came down. I believe the Lord rewarded their faithfulness.

In 1985 it was a privilege to witness their joy at the dedication of their temple in Freiberg. They have honored their temple commitments, and their temple has been enlarged.

With the building of temples around the world in recent years, most of us do not have to make the sacrifices that were needed to build the Nauvoo Temple or endure the long years of faithful waiting as did the Saints for the Freiberg Germany Temple; but the covenants we make are just as sacred and require the same level of commitment. A temple standard of modesty is an outward expression of our increased knowledge and commitment—not just looking modest but actually being modest in every aspect of life.

Keeping Commitments

What is our attitude toward our commitments? When we promise to always remember Him and keep His commandments, He doesn't mention any exceptions. We are expected to remain faithful at home, at work, at school, and even on vacation. If we try to keep one foot out of the baptismal water, it cannot work. We will never get praise from everyone. That is fine,

even desirable. To try to be a chameleon, changing our position to appeal to everyone, is to spend our life in futility and in the long run, please no one, especially ourselves or the Lord.

Sometimes some try to keep only the letter of the law. In the case of modest clothing, that would be choosing clothes that come within a thread of being immodest. On the grounds of the Church offices is a beautiful garden with lovely flowers in the spring, summer, and fall, and shining Christmas lights in the winter. Young couples, newly sealed in the temple, choose this garden to have photographs taken to remember their wedding day. Most of the brides wear beautiful dresses, appropriate to the teachings and covenants of the temple. A few, however, push the boundaries of what is appropriate. Their dresses are more of a worldly fashion statement than an outward expression of the covenants they have just made in the temple. Their choice of dress does not show respect for themselves, their husbands, or the Lord.

We need to enjoy our lives within the bounds of the commitments we have made. For example, if you drive into the country, you may see cows in a field. Some are in a shelter, some roaming, enjoying the wide range available to them, or some just resting. And there are some who hover along the fence. They try to put their heads through the fence and nibble the grass on the other side. True, they are inside the fence by the width of a one-inch board or a strand of wire, but their focus and interest is on the other side.

It is all in the attitude. Keeping a law with stinginess can hardly merit generous blessings or greater understanding. When one lives only the letter of the law, over time it is difficult to sustain because it is such a chore, for there is no joy in it. So burdensome is letter-of-the-law obedience that in time we may begin to look for excuses to get out of it. Hopefully, we will seek a deeper understanding and be able to embrace the concept so it can be a joyful choice that becomes our natural preference.

Modesty is an attitude of the heart as much as of the mind. Willing obedience results in greater understanding. In an article in the August 1997 *Ensign*, Elder Carlos Asay said, “There are some who would welcome a detailed dress code answering every conceivable question. . . . Most Latter-day Saints, however, rejoice over the moral agency extended them by a loving Father in Heaven.”⁴ There cannot be enough rules written to cover every possible situation. Once we are able to keep the spirit of the law, we have the Spirit to guide us in every situation. Then we can appropriately govern ourselves.

Does our language, our behavior, and our appearance reflect the truths we know about the value of our souls and the seriousness of our commitments? Harmony between our behavior and our belief is essential to a healthy sense of self-worth. When we are striving, not yet perfected but seriously striving to have integrity between our behavior and our commitments, then we can be comfortable with who we are. We can take our focus off ourselves and move on to accomplishing the task at hand and expand our view to be concerned about the welfare of others.

The Lord wants us to recognize the opportunity it is to be able to have a mortal body. He has tried to let us know how much He loves us and values our souls. He has entered into covenants with us to keep us focused on the important things. How much we receive of these gifts is up to us.

Doctrine and Covenants 88:22 explains about the Judgment. It says that he who cannot abide celestial law cannot abide celestial glory. We decide the level of law we choose to keep. Then it goes on to say the same about the telestial and terrestrial laws.

Then, in a very poignant passage the scriptures teach: “And they who remain shall also be quickened; nevertheless, they shall return again to their own place, to enjoy that which they are willing to receive, because they were not willing to enjoy that which they might have received.

“For what doth it profit a man if a gift is bestowed upon him, and he receive not the gift? Behold, he rejoices not in that which is given unto him, neither rejoices in him who is the giver of the gift” (D&C 88:32–33).

We have been given a gift of a mortal body which is of heavenly design in order that we may progress according to God’s plan. Do we appreciate that gift? Do we give gratitude to God for it? Do we show respect for it through “an attitude of humility, decency, and propriety . . . evidenced in language, dress, and behavior”?⁵

I pray that each of us will respect our body as sacred and divine, that we will keep our covenants with God and continue faithful to God’s plan, as we did in the premortal life, and that our modesty will be an outward expression of our inner commitment. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

¹ Daniel H. Ludlow et al., ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:932.

² Gordon B. Hinckley, *Stand a Little Taller: Counsel and Inspiration for Each Day of the Year* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 189.

³ Dell Van Orden, “Opportunities Unfold in ‘Week of Wonder,’” *LDS Church News*, 12 November 1988.

⁴ Carlos E. Asay, “The Temple Garment: ‘An Outward Expression of an Inward Commitment,’” *Ensign*, August 1997, 9.

⁵ Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:932.