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STANDARDS OF WORTHINESS



Brethren, think for a moment about your happiest experience in all your Church service. Now think about your saddest experience in your service. For most of us, both moments will be about people. Your happiest moments, and mine, have been when someone we loved and served rose up to live the Lord's standards of worthiness and reaped blessings from it. And the saddest moment will have been when someone reaped misery from failing to rise to those standards.

The Lord's Standards

The Lord sets His standards so that He can bless us. Think about those blessings: He promises those who meet the standards the help of the Holy Ghost. He promises personal peace. He promises the chance to

receive holy ordinances in His house. And He promises those who endure in living His standards that they will have eternal life. They will live in families in the presence of our Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son.

The Lord sets standards of what we must be and what we must do to be worthy of His blessings. Every missionary has seen that work. I did. I saw it when I baptized a big, strong 20-year-old man. When I brought him up out of the water, he grabbed me and with a smile on his face he said, over and over again, "I'm clean! I'm clean!" Some of the water pouring down off his face was from the font, but some of it was tears of joy from his eyes.

When my companion and I placed our hands on his head later to confirm him a member of the Church and give him the gift of the Holy Ghost, he found a quiet moment with us afterwards. His face was shining and he said, "When you had your hands on my head, I felt a warmth go through me from my head and down into my chest. It was like fire."

We baptized nearly 20 people in that city. He was the only one, at least that I remember, who told us so clearly that the promised blessings from being baptized in water and by the Spirit had been given him. All the other people we baptized had desired baptism. All of them had at least some confirmation by the Spirit that some-

thing we taught them was true. But with him, we made sure he had met the standard, the Lord's standard, for baptism.

You remember that standard from the Doctrine and Covenants: "And again, by way of commandment to the church concerning the manner of baptism—All those who humble themselves before God, and desire to be baptized, and come forth with broken hearts and contrite spirits, and witness before the church that they have truly repented of all their sins, and are willing to take upon them the name of Jesus Christ, having a determination to serve him to the end, and truly manifest by their works that they have received of the Spirit of Christ unto the remission of their sins, shall be received by baptism into his church" (D&C 20:37).

Now, that young man met the Lord's standards of worthiness for baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost, and so the Lord gave him the blessings. There are also standards of worthiness to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood. There are standards to receive the blessings of the temples of the Lord. They are high and they are unchangeable. We have no right to alter them or to ignore them when we recommend anyone for sacred blessings.

The Lord's standard of worthiness includes some commandments we cannot break. We must be chaste. We must be full-tithe payers. We must keep the Word of Wisdom. We must be honest. And those commandments must be kept with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and with a humble and repentant heart.

Because we love the people we serve, all of us want to do better in lifting our Heavenly Father's children to the faithfulness and purity they need, to have all the blessings of the Lord. Brethren, my purpose today is to help you find ways to do that.

You know where to start, from your own experience and from what the scriptures tell us about how the prophets did it. You begin by holding up the Lord's standards clearly and without apology. And the more the world drifts from them and mocks them, the bolder we must be in doing that.

Let's start with the standard the Lord has set to receive a temple recommend. Lifting people to that standard is a great test of our leadership. The standard is very high. It has to be. Those who meet it are worthy to enter the house of the Lord. They have to be pure enough to go where the Lord Himself can go.

Temple Recommend Interviews

We'll talk about how the first temple recommend interview should be conducted by a bishop or branch president. From that, we will see more clearly what all of us must do to help people rise to the Lord's standards of worthiness.

To make it easier to visualize, think of yourself as a bishop or branch president about to interview someone for his or her first temple recommend. Before the applicant arrives, you have prepared yourself for the interview. You have prayed for the gift of inspiration. Only with revelation from God can you succeed.

You made absolutely sure the interview will be private. And you scheduled enough time so that you won't be rushed.

Now let's start with what you do as members enter. You make them feel welcome. You must find a way to say that you represent the Lord in this interview. Answers to your questions certify worthiness to Him, through you. You should tell them that they would want to enter the house of the Lord only as they are free from any unclean, unholy, impure, or unnatural practice and thus are worthy of the companionship of the Holy Ghost.

And you should let them know that you have prayed for the spirit of discernment—for them and for you.

Even if you think you know the person's worthiness well from previous interviews, you ask all the questions in the recommend book. You should not add any requirements. Satisfactory answers to those questions will allow you to know that the person is qualified to enter the temple.

The first three questions give you a great opportunity. They each begin with, "Do you have a testimony of . . ." The first is about the Godhead, the second is about the Atonement of Jesus Christ, and the third is about the Restoration of the gospel in the latter days. Each can be answered with a single word: "Yes." But rather than rush on to the next questions, you would be wise to invite members to express their feelings. You might ask what the Atonement has meant to them or how they feel about the Prophet Joseph Smith. When they answer, they and you will feel the Holy Ghost bearing witness. That will help them answer honestly all the questions which will follow. And it will help you discern their worthiness.

Then ask the next question about sustaining the leaders of the Church as the called servants of God. Although that does not include the words "do you have a testimony," an affirmative answer is a witness that they know by the Holy Ghost that the Lord calls His servants in His Church.

The questions which follow in the temple recommend interview include whether they live the law of chastity, live righteously in their families, are not affiliated with or sympathetic to apostate groups, strive to keep covenants, are honest, pay a full tithe, and keep the Word of Wisdom.

Answers to all of those questions require self-evaluation. That means they must know the Lord's standard in sufficient detail to answer. And it

means that they must have decided to be honest, whatever the cost.

That is particularly important and difficult for the standard of chastity when you interview young, unmarried applicants. The Lord's standard is brief and clear: it is to have no sexual relations with anyone except with your husband or wife. The drift in the world has misled some young people before marriage to delude themselves that they have not violated the standard of chastity when they have. Some may think themselves chaste when they aren't. Some may have rationalized their sins this way with this thought: "If the bishop doesn't ask about sexual acts in detail, I don't have to confess and repent."

You must pray for revelation to act wisely. Each individual is different and has different experiences. You must be particularly careful not to discuss the private sexual life of a married applicant. You must never be immodest. You must never put temptations into the mind of the person you interview by what you ask or say.

And yet for the unmarried applicant, you must dig deeply enough to allow you to discern whether the person is chaste by the Lord's standards. If you are impressed to do it, you might use the statement in the booklet *For the Strength of Youth*. It has three pages in which the standard is given in enough detail to give guidance to unmarried people.

But, bishop, if you find very often that you have to explain the standard of chastity or what a full tithing is in those interviews, you know that they need more preparation.

Before the Interview

Before you invite members for their first temple recommend interview, you can give them the opportunity to attend a temple preparation seminar. Stake presidents or bishops can organize those seminars. You may invite to those seminars, as

you are inspired, those who are less-active members, new members of the Church, unendowed adults, and endowed members who have not renewed their recommends for a long time. Everyone invited to that seminar is to read carefully and prayerfully the new and wonderful booklet *Preparing to Enter the Holy Temple*.

There is a teacher's manual for that seminar entitled *Endowed from on High*. Listen to the first sentence under the paragraph describing who is to attend: "Participants in this course should desire to go to the temple and be worthy of a temple recommend. If they have not yet received a temple recommend, they should be preparing to receive one" ([1995], iv).

Bishops and branch presidents, that means that people must be lifted to the worthiness standard before the temple recommend interview. They should start the preparation seminar already living the worthiness standard.

Brethren, you can see why that is so. For instance, if the standard of chastity must be explained in graphic detail in the interview, the possibility of tragedy is great. Many of us know the pain, the heartbreak, the test of faith that comes when people must be told in that interview that they are not worthy to go the temple. Even when they answer the questions with the right answers, you may have to say at the end of the interview, "I don't have a settled feeling about signing your recommend tonight. Let's meet again soon." From that will come a confession which could have come earlier. The confession is a blessing because the member can start the redemptive process of repentance.

But the time to repent fully may be long. It would be so much better for them if they had been taught the standards early. Not only would they be ready to answer the questions with confidence in a temple recommend interview, but that early start to live the

standards might have fortified them against temptation. The temple recommend interview can be a joyful time when repentance is complete and members feel the peace of knowing that they have met the Lord's standard.

Help from Family and Others

Brethren, you already have the power you need from your calls to help members rise to the Lord's standards. But the bishops and branch presidents are heavily burdened. They can't prepare every candidate alone. They need help.

Bishop, there is a simple thing you can do. Think of the names of people who need preparation to understand and live the standards of the house of the Lord. Write down their names. Pray about them.

Now ask yourself this question: "What does each of those people need to know about the standards and getting the faith to live them?" It will be a little different for each one. One program won't fit them all. They need help fitted just to them.

But there are some things they all need. They need to know the standards. Then they must get a testimony that living the standards will bring happiness. They need to want that happiness. And they need to have a testimony by the Spirit that not living the standards will bring misery, in this life and the next.

And so, ask this question: "Where is that person most likely to get the needed individual help?" What you will find is that for all members what they need is already in place.

Start with families. The family is where standards are best taught and where that testimony is most likely to come. Parents can be clear and consistent about standards as no one else can. But too many aren't doing it yet as well as they can.

So you should gather together in council to seek revelation to know what is keeping families in your unit

from rising to their solemn charge to teach their children "to understand the doctrine of repentance, faith in Christ the Son of the living God, and of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of the hands" (D&C 68:25). The Lord will answer as you counsel together and pray. You will then know what to do and what not to do. And your families will be given greater power.

Now, some members will not have faithful parents and families around them. They must be taught by quorum leaders and class leaders or by Young Men or Young Women leaders. You may not have enough active members to staff every position. But you can be sure that all those you are preparing for temple blessings have someone who cares about them, who is set apart to teach them, and who has also been taught the Lord's standards and feels the blessings that come from living them. How to do that in your unit will be another productive question for you to discuss in your councils.

Bishops, here is a change to make in the way you lead. Think of the people. Ask, "Am I sure that there is someone called to watch over each member, someone who can help each member rise to those standards, to become worthy of the temple of God?"

Remember your aim—it is to make each person responsible and accountable to God for living His standards. That means that the people being prepared for the temple need more than someone to serve them; they need to be called to serve others. In fact, they need to serve others more than they need to be served. The Lord has provided opportunities to serve in the largest ward and the smallest branch in the Church, anywhere in the world. For instance, every priesthood holder from a teacher to a high priest and every woman in the Relief Society can be

called to visit other members for the Lord.

In what appears to be that simple responsibility to visit, there is the necessity to exercise faith, to ponder the scriptures, and to plead with God for help. Think of the charge from the Lord to those we call "home teachers." Consider what doing such a work would do to teach both the standards of worthiness and the blessings of living them:

"The teacher's duty is to watch over the church always, and be with and strengthen them;

"And see that there is no iniquity in the church, neither hardness with each other, neither lying, backbiting, nor evil speaking;

"And see that the church meet together often, and also see that all the members do their duty" (D&C 20:53–55).

Do you hear in those words an echo of the temple standard? That call puts them in the place of lifting others to the standards of worthiness. All calls to serve in the kingdom of God, properly given, are calls to rise to the Lord's standards of worthiness and to help others rise to them. With those calls revelation is promised for those who seek it in faith. With those calls, faithfully performed, testimony and forgiveness through the Atonement will come. When the Holy Ghost becomes a companion, then the standards become clear and the rewards for meeting them both sweet and sure.

Drawing Us to Him

The Lord has given us His standards of worthiness. He has not done it to keep us away from Him but to draw us to Him.

We must be bold in holding the Lord's standard before the people. They must be chaste. They must be full-tithe payers. They must live the Word of Wisdom. They must be honest. That is required of the Lord's people. If we fail to do all we can to

see that they rise to the Lord's standards, their sorrows will come upon us.

I testify that as we hold the Lord's standards high, they will draw the people to the Lord. More people, not fewer, will respond to the invitation of the missionaries to enter the door of baptism and come into the Church. And more of them will be true converts, cleansed and changed. With standards held high, more missionaries will go into the field with greater power. And more of your members will enter the temples of God with the feeling that they are going home, worthy of the sacred privilege.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

HOME TEACHING