

Elder Neal A. Maxwell

Doctrinal teachings concerning *desire*

Brothers and sisters, the scriptures offer us so many doctrinal diamonds. And when the light of the Spirit plays upon their several facets, they sparkle with celestial sense and illuminate the path we are to follow.

Exemplifying this happy reality are the doctrinal teachings concerning *desire*, which relates so directly to our moral agency and our individuality. Whether in their conception or expression, our desires profoundly affect the use of our moral agency. Desires thus become real determinants, even when, with pitiful naïveté, we do not really want the consequences of our desires.

Desire denotes a real longing or craving. Hence, righteous desires are much more than passive preferences or fleeting feelings. Of course our genes, circumstances, and environments matter very much, and they shape us significantly. Yet there remains an inner zone in which we are sovereign unless we abdicate. In this zone lies the essence of our individuality and our personal accountability.

Therefore, what we insistently desire, over time, is what we will eventually become and what we will receive in eternity. "For I [said the Lord] will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts" (D&C 137:9; see also Jeremiah 17:10). Alma said, "I know that [God] granteth unto men according to their desire . . . ; yea, I know that he alloteth unto men . . . according to their wills" (Alma 29:4). To reach this equitable end, God's canopy of mercy is stretched out, including "all that shall die henceforth without a knowledge of [the gospel], who would have received it with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom; For I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, accord-

ing to the desire of their hearts" (D&C 137:8-9).

God thus takes into merciful account not only our desires and our performance, but also the degrees of difficulty which our varied circumstances impose upon us. No wonder we will not complain at the final judgment, especially since even the telestial kingdom's glory "surpasses all understanding" (D&C 76:89). God delights in blessing us, especially when we realize "joy in that which [we] have desired" (D&C 7:8).

However, in contrast to God's merciful plan for our joy and glory, Satan "[desires] that all men might be miserable like unto himself" (2 Nephi 2:27).

Acknowledge responsibility for desires

Mostly, brothers and sisters, we become the victims of our own wrong desires. Moreover, we live in an age when many simply refuse to feel responsible for themselves. Thus, a crystal-clear understanding of the doctrines pertaining to desire is so vital because of the spreading effluent oozing out of so many unjustified excuses by so many. This is like a sludge which is sweeping society along toward "the gulf of misery and endless woe" (Helaman 5:12). Feeding that same flow is the selfish philosophy of "no fault," which is replacing the meek and apologetic "my fault." We listen with eager ear to hear genuine pleas for forgiveness instead of the ritualistic "Sorry. I hope I can forgive myself."

Some seek to brush aside conscience, refusing to hear its voice. But that deflection is, in itself, an act of choice, because we so desired. Even when the light of Christ flickers only faintly in the darkness, it flickers nevertheless. If one averts his gaze therefrom, it is because he so desires.

Like it or not, therefore, reality requires that we acknowledge our responsibility for our desires. Brothers and sisters, which do we really desire, God's plans for us or Satan's?

Righteous desires

Whenever spiritually significant things are under way, righteous desires are present. Meek desire characterized those awaiting baptism at the waters of Mormon. With their baptismal commitments spelled out specifically, "they . . . exclaimed: This is the desire of our hearts" (Mosiah 18:11). The Nephite multitude, enraptured by the presence of the resurrected Jesus, knelt in humble and intensive prayer, yet "they did not multiply many words, for it was given unto them what they should pray, and they were filled with desire" (3 Nephi 19:24).

No wonder desires also determine the gradations in outcomes, including why "many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14; see D&C 95:5).

It is up to us. God will facilitate, but He will not force.

Righteous desires need to be relentless, therefore, because, said President Brigham Young, "the men and women, who desire to obtain seats in the celestial kingdom, will find that they must battle every day" (in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:14). Therefore, true Christian soldiers are more than weekend warriors.

Absence of desire

The absence of any keen desire—merely being lukewarm—causes a terrible flattening (see Revelation 3:15). William R. May explained such sloth: "The soul in this state is beyond mere sadness and melancholy. It has removed itself from the rise and fall of feelings; the very root of its feelings in desire is dead. . . . To be a man is to desire. The

good man desires God and other things in God. The sinful man desires things in the place of God, but he is still recognizably human, inasmuch as he has known desire. The slothful man, however, is a dead man, an arid waste. . . . His desire itself has dried up" ("A Catalogue of Sins," quoted in *Christian Century*, 24 Apr. 1996, 457).

This sad condition is yet another variation of the "sorrowing of the damned" (Mormon 2:13).

Even a spark of desire can begin change. The prodigal son, sunk in despair, nevertheless desired and "came to himself," determining that "I will arise and go to my father" (Luke 15:17-18).

Educating our desires

What we are speaking about is so much more than merely deflecting temptations for which we somehow do not feel responsible. Remember, brothers and sisters, it is our own desires which determine the sizing and the attractiveness of various temptations. We set our thermostats as to temptations.

Thus, educating and training our desires clearly requires understanding the truths of the gospel, yet even more is involved. President Brigham Young confirmed, saying, "It is evident that many who understand the truth do not govern themselves by it; consequently, no matter how true and beautiful truth is, you have to take the passions of the people and mould them to the law of God" (in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:55).

"Do you," President Young asked, "think that people will obey the truth because it is true, unless they love it? No, they will not" (in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:55). Thus, knowing gospel truths and doctrines is profoundly important, but we must also come to love them. When we love them, they will move us and help our desires and outward works to become more holy.

Each assertion of a righteous desire, each act of service, and each act of worship, however small and incremental, adds to our spiritual momentum. Like Newton's Second Law, there is a transmitting of acceleration as well as a contagiousness associated with even the small acts of goodness.

Fortunately for us, our loving Lord will work with us, "even if [we] can [do] no more than desire to believe," providing we will "let this desire work in [us]" (Alma 32:27). Therefore, declared President Joseph F. Smith, "the education then of our desires is one of far-reaching importance to our happiness in life" (*Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. [1939], 297). Such education can lead to sanctification until, said President Brigham Young, "holy desires produce corresponding outward works" (in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:170). Only by educating and training our desires can they become our allies instead of our enemies!

Dissolve wrong desires; strengthen good ones

Some of our present desires, therefore, need to be diminished and then finally dissolved. For instance, the biblical counsel "let not thine heart envy sinners" is directed squarely at those with a sad unsettlement of soul (Proverbs 23:17). Once again, we must be honest with ourselves about the consequences of our desires, which follow as the night, the day. Similarly, faced with life's so-called bad breaks, the natural man desires to wallow in self-pity; therefore this desire must go too.

But dissolution of wrong desires is only part of it. For instance, what is now only a weak desire to be a better spouse, father, or mother needs to become a stronger desire, just as Abraham experienced divine discontent and desired greater happiness and knowledge (see Abraham 1:2).

Our merciful and long-suffering Lord is ever ready to help. His "arm is lengthened out all the day long" (2 Nephi 28:32), and even if His arm goes ungrasped, it was unarguably there! In the same redemptive reaching out, our desiring to improve our human relationships usually requires some long-suffering. Sometimes reaching out is like trying to pat a porcupine. Even so, the accumulated quill marks are evidence that our hands of fellowship have been stretched out too!

It is up to us. Therein lies life's greatest and most persistent challenge. Thus, when people are described as "having lost their desire for sin," it is they, and they only, who deliberately decided to lose those wrong desires by being willing to "give away all [their] sins" in order to know God (Alma 22:18).

Parents assist in educating desires

Unquestionably, parents have such a profound role in assisting in the educating of our desires, especially when parents combine explanation and exemplification! Even so, given our responsibilities for our own desires, we should not be surprised that Adam and Eve, such superb parents who conscientiously taught all things to their children, still lost some of them! Lehi and Sariah made the same effort, doing so "with all the feeling of a tender parent" (1 Nephi 8:37). Yet they experienced the same thing with Laman and Lemuel, who "understood not the dealings of the Lord" (Mosiah 10:14). Fixing responsibility for such recalcitrance where it should be, the Prophet Joseph Smith observed: "Men who have no principle of . . . truth, do not understand the word of truth when they hear it. The devil taketh away the word of truth out of their hearts, because there is no desire for righteousness in them" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith [1976], 96).

Nevertheless, conscientious and able parents will do all they can do to exemplify and explain. Besides, righteous parents are teaching more than they now realize. The later applications of and the grateful expressions for earlier parental influence are often delayed, and often for a long time.

With true desire, we can then really plead:

More holiness give me, . . .
 More patience in suffering,
 More sorrow for sin,
 More faith in my Savior, . . .
 More tears for his sorrows,
 More pain at his grief,
 More meekness in trial,
 More praise for relief.
 ["More Holiness Give Me," *Hymns*,
 no. 131]

Begin now to train desires

Brothers and sisters, a loving God will work with us, but the initiating particle of desire which ignites the spark of resolve must be our own!

It all takes time. Said the Prophet Joseph: "The nearer man approaches

perfection, the clearer are his views, and the greater his enjoyments, till he has overcome the evils of his life and lost every desire for sin; and like the ancients, arrives at that point of faith where he is wrapped in the power and glory of his Maker and is caught up to dwell with Him. But we consider that this is a station to which no man ever arrived in a moment" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 51).

Thus the work of eternity is not done in a moment, but, rather, in "process of time." Time works for us when our desires do likewise!

May God help us so to train our desires, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen!

President Faust

We have just listened to Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Elder M. Russell Ballard, also a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, will be our next speaker. He will be followed by Elder Bruce C. Hafen, who was sustained at April conference as a new member of the Seventy.

Elder M. Russell Ballard

Faith in every footstep

This year, 1996, we have enjoyed a great centennial celebration of statehood in Utah that has given our citizens an opportunity to reflect upon the important accomplishments of the past 100 years. In 1997 the Church will celebrate the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the pioneers in the Salt Lake Valley. During the sesquicentennial year, Church members worldwide will have the opportunity to focus their attention on the pioneer trek from Nauvoo to the Salt Lake Valley. The theme for the sesquicentennial celebration is "Faith in Every Footstep."

Sacrifices of pioneers

This August I walked in the footsteps of our pioneers along the Mormon Trail through Wyoming and Utah. I wondered why our dedicated ancestors suffered so terribly and yet willingly faced such tremendous obstacles. Perhaps one reason they sacrificed and endured was to leave a legacy of faith for all of us to help us feel our urgent responsibility to move forward in building up the Church throughout the world. We need the same dedication today in every one of our footsteps as the pioneers had in theirs.