

# On Being Genuine

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I pray that we will resist the temptation to draw attention to ourselves and, instead, strive for a far greater honor: to become humble, genuine disciples of Jesus Christ.

In the late 18th century, Catherine the Great of Russia announced she would tour the southern part of her empire, accompanied by several foreign ambassadors. The governor of the area, Grigory Potemkin, desperately wanted to impress these visitors. And so he went to remarkable lengths to showcase the country's accomplishments.

For part of the journey, Catherine floated down the Dnieper River, proudly pointing out to the ambassadors the thriving hamlets along the shore, filled with industrious and happy townspeople. There was only one problem: it was all for show. It is said that Potemkin had assembled pasteboard facades of shops and homes. He had even positioned busy-looking peasants to create the impression of a prosperous economy. Once the party disappeared around the bend of the river, Potemkin's men packed up the fake village and rushed it downstream in preparation for Catherine's next pass.

Although modern historians have questioned the truthfulness of this story, the term "Potemkin village" has entered the world's vocabulary. It now refers to any attempt to make others believe we are better than we really are.

## Are Our Hearts in the Right Place?

It is part of human nature to want to look our best. It is why many of us work so hard on the exterior of our homes and why our young Aaronic Priesthood brethren make sure every hair is in place, just in case they run into that special someone. There is nothing wrong with shining our shoes, smelling our best, or even hiding the dirty dishes before the home teachers arrive. However, when taken to extremes, this desire to impress can shift from useful to deceitful.

The Lord's prophets have ever raised a warning voice against those who "draw near [to the Lord] with their mouth, and with their lips do honour [Him], but have removed their heart far from [Him]."<sup>1</sup>

The Savior was understanding and compassionate with sinners whose hearts were humble and sincere. But He rose up in righteous anger against hypocrites like the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees—those who tried to appear righteous in order to win the praise, influence, and wealth of the world, all the while oppressing the people they should have been blessing. The Savior compared them to "whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness."<sup>2</sup>

In our day, the Lord has similarly strong words for priesthood holders who try to "cover [their] sins, or to gratify [their] pride, [or their] vain ambition." When they do this, He said, "the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man."<sup>3</sup>

Why does this happen? Why do we sometimes try to appear active, prosperous, and dedicated outwardly when on the inside—as the Revelator said of the Ephesians—we have “left [our] first love”?<sup>4</sup>

In some cases, we may simply have lost our focus on the essence of the gospel, mistaking the “form of godliness” for the “power thereof.”<sup>5</sup> This is especially dangerous when we direct our outward expressions of discipleship to impress others for personal gain or influence. It is then that we are at risk of entering into Pharisee territory, and it is high time to examine our hearts to make immediate course corrections.

## Potemkin Programs

This temptation to appear better than we are is found not just in our personal lives but can be found in our Church assignments as well.

For example, I know of a stake where the leaders set some ambitious goals for the year. While the goals all looked worthwhile, they focused either on lofty and impressive declarations or on numbers and percentages.

After these goals had been discussed and agreed upon, something began to trouble the stake president. He thought about the members of his stake—like the young mother with small children who was recently widowed. He thought about the members who were struggling with doubts or loneliness or with severe health conditions and no insurance. He thought about the members who were grappling with broken marriages, addictions, unemployment, and mental illness. And the more he thought about them, the more he asked himself a humbling question: will our new goals make a difference in the lives of these members?

He began to wonder how their stake’s goals might have been different if they had first asked, “What is our ministry?”

So this stake president went back to his councils, and together they shifted their focus. They determined that they would not allow “the hungry, ... the needy, ...the naked, ... the sick and the afflicted to pass by [them], and notice them not.”<sup>6</sup>

They set new goals, recognizing that success with *these* new goals could not always be measured, at least not by man—for how does one measure personal testimony, love of God, or compassion for others?

But they also knew that “many of the things you can count, do not count. Many of the things you cannot count, really do count.”<sup>7</sup>

I wonder if our organizational and personal goals are sometimes the modern equivalent of a Potemkin village. Do they look impressive from a distance but fail to address the real needs of our beloved fellowmen?

My dear friends and fellow priesthood holders, if Jesus Christ were to sit down with us and ask for an accounting of our stewardship, I am not sure He would focus much on programs and statistics. What the Savior would want to know is the condition of our heart. He would want to know how we love and minister to those in our care, how we show our love to our spouse and family, and how we lighten their daily load. And the Savior would want to know how you and I grow closer to Him and to our Heavenly Father.

## Why Are We Here?

It may be beneficial to search our own hearts. For example, we might ask ourselves, why do we serve in the Church of

Jesus Christ?

We could even ask, why are we here at this meeting today?

I suppose if I were to answer that question on a superficial level, I could say that I'm here because President Monson assigned me to speak.

So I really didn't have a choice.

Besides that, my wife, whom I love very much, expects me to attend. And how can I say no to her?

But we all know there are better reasons for attending our meetings and living our lives as committed disciples of Jesus Christ.

I am here because I desire with all my heart to follow my Master, Jesus Christ. I yearn to do all that He asks of me in this great cause. I hunger to be edified by the Holy Spirit and hear the voice of God as He speaks through His ordained servants. I am here to become a better man, to be lifted by the inspiring examples of my brothers and sisters in Christ, and to learn how to more effectively minister to those in need.

In short, I am here because I love my Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

I am sure this is your reason too. This is why we are willing to make sacrifices and not just declarations to follow the Savior. This is why we bear with honor His holy priesthood.

## From Spark to Bonfire

Whether your testimony is thriving and healthy or your activity in the Church more closely resembles a Potemkin village, the good news is that you can build on whatever strength you have. Here in the Church of Jesus Christ you can mature spiritually and draw closer to the Savior by *applying* gospel principles *day by day*.

With patience and persistence, even the smallest act of discipleship or the tiniest ember of belief can become a blazing bonfire of a consecrated life. In fact, that's how most bonfires begin—as a simple spark.

So if you feel small and weak, please simply come unto Christ, who makes weak things strong.<sup>8</sup> The weakest among us, through God's grace, can become spiritually strong, because God "is no respecter of persons."<sup>9</sup> He is our "faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments."<sup>10</sup>

It is my conviction that if God can reach out and sustain a poor German refugee from a modest family in a war-torn country half a world away from the headquarters of the Church, then He can reach out to you.

My beloved brothers in Christ, the God of Creation, who breathed life into the universe, surely has the power to breathe life into you. Surely He can make of you the genuine, spiritual being of light and truth you desire to be.

God's promises are sure and certain. We can be forgiven of our sins and cleansed from all unrighteousness.<sup>11</sup> And if we continue to embrace and live true principles in our personal circumstances and in our families, we will ultimately arrive at a point where we "hunger no more, neither thirst any more. ... For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed [us], and shall lead [us] unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from [our] eyes."<sup>12</sup>

# The Church Is a Place of Healing, Not Hiding

But this cannot happen if we hide behind personal, dogmatic, or organizational facades. Such artificial discipleship not only keeps us from seeing ourselves as who we really are, but it also prevents us from truly changing through the miracle of the Savior's Atonement.

The Church is not an automobile showroom—a place to put ourselves on display so that others can admire our spirituality, capacity, or prosperity. It is more like a service center, where vehicles in need of repair come for maintenance and rehabilitation.

And are we not, all of us, in need of repair, maintenance, and rehabilitation?

We come to church not to hide our problems but to heal them.

And as priesthood holders, we have an additional responsibility—to “feed the flock of God ... , not by constraint, but willingly; not for [personal gain], but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being [ex]amples to the flock.”<sup>3</sup>

Remember, brethren, “God resist[s] the proud, but give[s] grace unto the humble.”<sup>4</sup>

The greatest, most capable, most accomplished man who ever walked this earth was also the most humble. He performed some of His most impressive service in private moments, with only a few observers, whom He asked to “tell no man” what He had done.<sup>15</sup> When someone called Him “good,” He quickly deflected the compliment, insisting that only God is truly good.<sup>16</sup> Clearly the praise of the world meant nothing to Him; His single purpose was to serve His Father and “do always those things that please him.”<sup>17</sup> We would do well to follow the example of our Master.

## May We Love as He Loved

Brethren, this is our high and holy calling—to be agents of Jesus Christ, to love as He loved, to serve as He served, to “lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees,”<sup>18</sup> to “look [after] the poor and the needy,”<sup>19</sup> and to care for the widows and orphans.<sup>20</sup>

I pray, brethren, that as we serve in our families, quorums, wards, stakes, communities, and nations, we will resist the temptation to draw attention to ourselves and, instead, strive for a far greater honor: to become humble, genuine disciples of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As we do so, we will find ourselves walking the path that leads to our best, most genuine, and noblest selves. Of this I testify in the name of our Master, Jesus Christ, amen.

1. Isaiah 29:13.

2. Matthew 23:27.

3. Doctrine and Covenants 121:37.

4. Revelation 2:4.

5. See Joseph Smith—History 1:19; see also Doctrine and Covenants 84:20.

6. Mormon 8:39.

7. Attributed to Albert Einstein.

8. See Ether 12:27.

9. Acts 10:34.

10. Deuteronomy 7:9.

11. See 1 John 1:9.

12. Revelation 7:16–17.

13. 1 Peter 5:2–3.

14. James 4:6.

15. See Luke 8:56.

16. See Mark 10:17–18.

17. John 8:29.

18. Doctrine and Covenants 81:5.

19. Doctrine and Covenants 38:35.

20. See Doctrine and Covenants 83:6.

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