

One Percent Better

By Elder Michael A. Dunn
Of the Seventy

Every effort to change we make—no matter how tiny it seems to us—just might make the biggest difference in our lives.

For more than a century, the national bicycle racing teams of Great Britain had been the laughingstock of the cycling world. Mired in mediocrity, British riders had managed only a handful of gold medals in 100 years of Olympic competitions and had been even more underwhelming in cycling's marquee event, the three-week long Tour de France—where no British rider had prevailed in 110 years. So sorry was the plight of British riders that some bike manufacturers refused to even sell bikes to the Brits, fearing it would forever sully their hard-won reputations. And despite devoting enormous resources into cutting-edge technology and every newfangled training regimen, nothing worked.

Nothing, that is, until 2003, when a small, largely unnoticed change occurred that would forever alter the trajectory of British cycling. That new approach would also reveal an eternal principle—with a promise—regarding our oftentimes perplexing mortal quest to improve ourselves. So what happened in British cycling that has great relevance to our personal pursuit to be better daughters and sons of God?

In 2003, Sir Dave Brailsford was hired. Unlike previous coaches who attempted dramatic, overnight turnarounds, Sir Brailsford instead committed to a strategy he referred to as “the aggregation of marginal gains.” This entailed implementing small improvements in everything. That meant constantly measuring key statistics and targeting specific weaknesses.

It's somewhat akin to the prophet Samuel the Lamanite's notion of “walk[ing] circumspectly.”¹ This broader, more holistic view avoids the trap of being myopically fixated on just the obvious problem or sin at hand. Said Brailsford, “The whole principle came from the idea that if you broke down everything you could think of that goes into riding a bike, and then improved it by 1 percent, you will get a significant increase when you put them all together.”²

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broadened it? Instead of trying to perfect everything, what if we tackled just one thing?

For example, what if in your new wide-angle awareness, you discover you have neglected a daily reading of the Book of Mormon? Well, instead of desperately plowing through all 531 pages in one night, what if we committed instead to read just 1 percent of it—that’s just five pages a day—or another manageable goal for your situation? Could aggregating small but steady *marginal gains* in our lives finally be the way to victory over even the most pesky of our personal shortcomings? Can this bite-sized approach to tackling our blemishes really work?

Well, acclaimed author James Clear says this strategy puts the math squarely in our favor. He maintains that “habits are the ‘compound interest of self-improvement.’ If you can get just one percent better at something each day, by the end of a year ... you will be 37 times better.”³

Brailsford’s small gains began with the obvious, such as equipment, kit fabrics, and training patterns. But his team didn’t stop there. They continued to find 1 percent improvements in overlooked and unexpected areas such as nutrition and even maintenance nuances. Over time, these myriads of micro-betterments aggregated into stunning results, which came faster than anyone could have imagined. Truly, they were onto the eternal principle of “line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.”⁴

Will little adjustments work that “mighty change”⁵ that you desire? Properly implemented, I’m 99 percent certain they will! But the one caveat with this approach is that for small gains to aggregate, there must be a consistent, day-in and day-out effort. And although we won’t likely be perfect, we must be determined to mirror our persistence with patience. Do that, and the sweet rewards of increased righteousness will bring you the joy and peace you seek. As President Russell M. Nelson has taught: “Nothing is more liberating, more ennobling, or more crucial to our individual progression than is a regular, daily focus on repentance. Repentance is not an event; it is a process. It is the key to happiness and peace of mind. When coupled with faith, repentance opens our access to the power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.”⁶

As to repentance’s prerequisite of faith, the scriptures are clear. All that’s initially required is a mere “particle of faith.”⁷ And if we can muster this “mustard seed”⁸ mentality, we too can expect unexpected and exceptional improvements in our lives. But remember, just as we would not attempt to go from being Attila the Hun to Mother Teresa overnight, so too should we reorient our patterns of improvement incrementally. Even if the changes needed in your life are wholesale, begin at a small scale. That’s especially true if you are feeling overwhelmed or discouraged.

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Obviously, if we are involved in grievous sins, the Lord is clear and unequivocal; we need to stop, get help from our bishop, and turn away from such practices immediately. But as Elder David A. Bednar enjoined: “Small, steady, incremental spiritual improvements are the steps the Lord would have us take. Preparing to walk guiltless before God is one of the primary purposes of mortality and the pursuit of a lifetime; it does not result from sporadic spurts of intense spiritual activity.”¹⁰

So, does this pocket-sized approach to repentance and real change really work? Is the proof in the pedaling, so to speak? Consider what’s happened to British cycling in the past two decades since implementing this philosophy. British cyclists have now won the storied Tour de France an astonishing six times. During the past four Olympic Games, Great Britain has been the most successful country across all cycling disciplines. And in the recently concluded Tokyo Olympics, the UK won more gold medals in cycling than any other country.

But far outshining worldly silver or gold, our precious promise down our roadway to the eternities is that we will indeed “triumph in Christ.”¹¹ And as we commit to making small but steady improvements, we are promised “a crown of glory that fadeth not away.”¹² With basking in that undimmable luster beckoning, I invite you to examine your life and see what’s stagnated or slowed you on the covenant pathway. Then look broader. Seek modest but makeable fixes in your life that might result in the sweet joy of being just a little better.

Remember, David used just one small stone to take down a seemingly invincible giant. But he had four other stones at the ready. Similarly, Alma the Younger’s wicked disposition and eternal destiny were altered by just one simple, salient thought—a remembrance of his father’s teachings about the saving grace of Jesus Christ. And so it is with our Savior, who, though sinless, “received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness.”¹³

It is He who knows when a sparrow falls that is likewise focused on the minute as well as the momentous moments in our lives and who is ready right now to assist you in whatever your 1 percent quest is coming out of this conference. Because every effort to change we make—no matter how tiny it seems to us—just might make the biggest difference in our lives.

To this end, Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, “Each assertion of a righteous desire, each act of service, and each act of worship, however small and incremental, adds to our spiritual momentum.”¹⁴ Truly, it is by small, simple, and, yes, even just 1 percent things that great things can be brought to pass.¹⁵ Ultimate victory is 100 percent certain, “after all we can do,”¹⁶ through the might, merits, and mercy of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I do testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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3. 3. James Clear, in Whitney Johnson, “James Clear: Just One Percent Better,” whitneyjohnson.com/james-clear.
4. 4. 2 Nephi 28:30.
5. 5. Alma 5:14.
6. 6. Russell M. Nelson, “We Can Do Better and Be Better,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2019, 67.
7. 7. Alma 32:27.
8. 8. Matthew 17:20.
9. 9. Isaiah 53:4.
10. 10. David A. Bednar, “Clean Hands and a Pure Heart,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2007, 82.
11. 11. 2 Corinthians 2:14.
12. 12. 1 Peter 5:4.
13. 13. Doctrine and Covenants 93:13.
14. 14. Neal A. Maxwell, “According to the Desire of [Our] Hearts,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1996, 22.
15. 15. See Alma 37:6.
16. 16. 2 Nephi 25:23.

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