

Conversion to Christ, The Character of Christ, and The Atonement of Christ

Address given by Elder David A. Bednar

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Brothers and Sisters, in anticipation of being with you here today, I've thought about you a lot. I've prayed and I've sought for inspiration from heaven to know the things that would be most appropriate to share with you this morning. I commend the instruction that we have received from Brother Beck, Sister Dalton, and Elder Christensen; and much has been said about the power of example, about the power of the believer being an example.

My mind reflected on a number of episodes, primarily in our own home, about the power of example. I thought of a young boy, one of our sons, who was approximately eight years of age. He was participating on a soccer team and they were doing really quite well. In fact, in a tournament at the conclusion of the season, they advanced to the championship game which would be played on a Sunday. At the time, Sister Bednar and I lived in Arkansas with our family. Now, we had tried to be diligent in teaching this young boy correct principles, but now the test was here. We would find out which was more important—keeping the Sabbath day holy, or a trophy about this big. I'll never forget watching this little boy as we said, "Well, Mike, what do you think you need to do?" and he said, "Well, mom and dad, we don't play on Sunday." It was very matter-of-fact. It was a foregone conclusion in the mind of this little boy. I said, "Well, what do you think we ought to do? Your coach needs to know this—you're not going to play." And he said, "Well, let's go visit the coach." And I said, "That's a good idea." So we jumped in the car and I drove him to the coach's home. I said, "Do you want me to go with you?" And he goes, "No." And the door opens and he bounds out of the car, rings the doorbell, the coach comes to the front door, and he says, "Coach, I won't be playing in the championship game on Sunday 'cause I'm going to be in church. See ya!" And he got into the car and, as a very conscientious dad, I simply said, "Well, Mike, are you OK?" And he said, "Yeah. Can we stop at McDonalds on the way home?" Now, it's intriguing to me that Susan and I had exercised our faith in teaching our son about faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and, as he exercised his faith, the example of that believer, that little boy, strengthened my faith. I wasn't surprised but, I guess, I was a little bit surprised to see the 'power of the word' impact the life of this little boy.

I can recall a number of years later, given that we lived in Arkansas, I was employed at the University of Arkansas and we had season basketball tickets and, at that time, the University of Arkansas had a remarkably good basketball team. They had won the National Championship one year. They were competing again in a succeeding year for that championship and one of the traditions in our family was, when we got the season tickets, we would put them all on the floor in our front room and, among our three sons, we would have a draft and they would take turns selecting which games they wanted to attend with either Susan or me. It was extremely

interesting to note that Arkansas was ranked #2 in the nation and the University of Nevada Las Vegas was ranked #1 and they were playing in Arkansas. It was a home game—on a Sunday. As we placed these tickets all over the floor, one of them said, “Dad! Dad! The Arkansas-UNLV game is on Sunday.” I said, “I know. What do you think we ought to do?” He said, “Uh, let’s give the tickets away, or sell them or something. But, Dad, hurry up before I change my mind!” Same episode, number of years later, the faith of these young men in our family strengthened my faith. Can I tell you about a very simple thing, that I observed this morning with you, that strengthens my faith? As Susan and I were driving here to the Conference Center, many of you were coming across the street and we were stopped at a series of red lights and so, as we were stopped at those red lights, I could just observe you as you were coming into the Conference Center and I saw this same thing happening in ninety-five other stake centers. Not literally did I see it, but in my mind’s eye I could see so many faithful saints, old and young, gathering for this Stake Conference and the example of you, as believers, strengthened my faith as I watched you come, gather, prepared to receive instruction by the power of the Holy Ghost. Your faith strengthened my faith and I thank you for that.

I express gratitude to all of you assembled throughout the valley for your goodness. The world may criticize, the world may mock but they cannot refute the power of your worthy example. Let them call us what they will. It will not change what you are and what you are speaks so loud that no-one can hear what they’re saying in their mocking and scorning. So, thank you for who you are and what you are and what you are striving to become. Now, as I have listened to the messages this morning, some thoughts have come to my mind that I want to share with you and they revolve around Conversion, as Elder Christensen has spoken, they revolve around the Character of Christ, and they revolve around the Atonement of Christ; Conversion unto the Savior, the Character of Christ, and the Atonement of Christ. If you’ll consider what Elder Christensen has taught about testimony and conversion—that testimony is a beginning, it is not a conclusion—and conversion is ongoing and should be ever-deepening. Testimony comes as we study a gospel truth, we ponder, we pray, and, by the witness of the Holy Ghost, we receive confirmation that that truth comes from God. That’s the beginning of a testimony. Thus, a testimony is what we know to be true by the witness of the Holy Ghost. Let me suggest to you that conversion grows out of testimony and extends from testimony, and conversion is consistently being true to what we know. Let me say that one more time. Testimony is what we know to be true by the witness of the Spirit but conversion is consistently being true to what we know and I want to emphasize and underscore the word ‘consistently’. In the world in which we live, testimony will not be enough. Now, I don’t want that to sound surprising or shocking, but there are many people, both now and in the history of the Church, that have had seemingly strong testimonies, but they have withered in opposition and they have fallen away. Testimony alone is not enough. Testimony must give rise to and lead to deepening, continuing, ongoing conversion to the Lord Jesus Christ. The importance of this is highlighted in the Book Mormon, in Alma, in chapter 23. Let me read this description and draw your attention to several elements

of these verses. I'd like you to keep in mind what Elder Christensen taught about testimony and conversion. This is in Alma, chapter 23, beginning in verse 5.

5 “And thousands were brought to the knowledge of the Lord,…”

Now, let me stop for a moment. Let me suggest that that phrase ‘the knowledge of the Lord’ is, in essence, synonymous with the word ‘testimony’.

5 “And thousands were brought to [develop testimonies] of the Lord, yea, thousands were brought to believe in the traditions of the Nephites; and they were taught the records and prophecies which were handed down even to the present time.

6 And as sure as the Lord liveth, so sure as many as believed, or as many as were brought to the knowledge of the truth,…”

Now, let me stop. Let's suggest that that phrase, ‘brought to a knowledge of the truth’, again, is roughly synonymous with having a testimony.

6 “…as many as were brought to [testimony], through the preaching of Ammon and his brethren, according to the spirit of revelation and of prophecy, and the power of God working miracles in them—yea, I say unto you, as the Lord liveth…”

Now, please listen.

6 “…as many of the Lamanites as believed in their preaching [in essence, developed testimony], and were converted unto the Lord, never did fall away.”

Testimony was not enough. Testimony had to lead to conversion and not just conversion, but conversion unto the Lord Jesus Christ. When both of those conditions were met—testimony and ongoing conversion unto the Lord—these people never did fall away.

7 “For they became a righteous people; they did lay down the weapons of their rebellion,…”

Question for me. Question for you. One of the indicators of continuing, deepening conversion unto the Lord Jesus Christ is that we will lay aside all of our weapons of rebellion. Do you and I hang on to some of those weapons of rebellion because we kind of like ‘em? That tells us a little bit about where we are at on the pathway of continuing, deepening conversion unto the Lord Jesus Christ.

7 “…they did not fight against God any more, neither against any of their brethren.

8 Now, these are they who were converted unto the Lord:..."

'Converted unto the Lord', not converted to the missionaries who taught them, not converted 'because I'm a sixth generation member of the Church and it's my heritage and the traditions of my fathers', not converted to the wonderful programs that we have in the Church. First, foremost, converted unto the Lord. Let me repeat. Testimony is essential. It is the beginning. It is what we know to be true by the witness of the Holy Ghost, and a testimony, alone, will not be enough in the latter days. A testimony, what we know to be true by the witness of the Holy Ghost, must become reflected in the consistency of how we live what we know is true. That is ongoing, deepening conversion unto the Lord Jesus Christ!

Let me suggest in Matthew, chapter 25, the Parable of the Ten Virgins emphasizes the relationship that Elder Christensen talked about between testimony and conversion. Now, I'll take just a little bit of liberty as I read the Parable of the Ten Virgins to make a few insertions into the text.

1 "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom."

Let's consider the 'lamp' in this parable to be the 'lamp of testimony'.

2 "And five of them were wise, and five were foolish.
3 They that were foolish took their lamps [of testimony, but] took no oil with them:"

Let's consider the 'oil' in this parable to be the 'oil of conversion'. The 'lamp of testimony' and the 'oil of conversion'.

4 "But the wise took oil [of conversion] in their vessels with their lamps [of testimony].
5 While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.
6 And at midnight, there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.
7 Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps [of testimony].
8 And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil [of conversion]; for our lamps [of testimony] are gone out.
9 But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves."

Now, Brothers and Sisters, were these five wise virgins stingy and unwilling to share? I don't believe that's the case at all. The 'oil of conversion' cannot be shared in a moment of adversity or crisis. The 'oil of conversion' comes drop by drop, "line upon line, precept upon precept; here

a little, and there a little;” (D&C 128:21). Can the spiritual knowledge and conviction and faith garnered through meaningful prayer and scripture study be quickly conveyed to someone else in a moment of challenge or adversity? Obviously not. It wasn’t that the five wise virgins were unwilling to share. Conversion is something that must be obtained. It cannot be given from one person to another. When it says in this verse (vs. 9), “...go...buy for yourselves”, I don’t think that’s talking about a transaction. It’s not a business exchange—a ‘money for some product’. This just simply says that we need to obtain the ‘oil of conversion’ having our ‘lamps of testimony’ fully trimmed and prepared and no-one else can do that for us. We must be properly prepared having both testimony and conversion.

- 10 “And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut.
- 11 Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.
- 12 But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not.
- 13 Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.”

Testimony is what we know to be true by the power of the Holy Ghost. It is a beginning. Conversion grows out of testimony. Conversion is consistently being true to what we know in our hearts by the witness and power of the Holy Ghost. Every single member of this church, baptized by proper authority, having received the Gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, I believe every single member of this church, has some measure of testimony. It is clearly the case that not every member of The Church is fully converted unto the Lord. Remember the admonition to Peter, “...when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.” (Luke 22:32). Even this chief apostle, who had been with the Savior through much of His mortal ministry, needed to be reminded of the requirement for ongoing, continuing, deepening conversion and being consistently true to what we know. Now, the scriptures describe the process of conversion as spiritual rebirth or ‘the mighty change of heart’ (Mosiah 5:2, Alma 5:12). Let me suggest a question for all of us to just consider. As we experience the ‘mighty change of heart’ and, as it deepens and grows and continues, what is that? What does that mean and what is the impact that it has upon us? Again, Elder Christensen referred to King Benjamin’s people who, as they heard the word, and sought for that continuing conversion, “...had no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually.” (Mosiah 5:2). As I began, I said there were three things that had come to my mind this morning: 1) deepening conversion; and 2) the Character of Christ. Let me suggest to you that we cannot understand the nature of ‘the mighty change of heart’, we cannot be fully converted unto the Lord until we understand some simple and basic things about the Character of Christ

The word ‘character’ refers to moral qualities, moral capacities, strongly developed and consistently lived. There’s that word ‘consistently’ again. Character refers to moral qualities,

moral capacity, strongly developed and consistently lived. I was with Elder Neal A. Maxwell many many years ago as he presided at a training session for a group of approximately one hundred stake presidents and he made a statement that just caught my attention and pricked me in the heart. The statement was, "Except for the character of Christ, there would have been no atoning sacrifice." Now, we all recall with fondness Elder Maxwell. He could give a sermon in twelve words that would cause you to think for years and that was one of those sermons. "Except for the character of Christ, there would have been no atoning sacrifice." And I pondered on that statement and I got to work and I read the New Testament and The Book of Mormon over and over again trying to identify, what is the 'Character of Christ' and why is that character at the core of the Savior's atoning sacrifice? I don't claim to have a complete answer. I'm still trying to understand more fully what his statement meant, but, let me share with you some things I've found in the scriptures that, I think, shed light on the Character of Christ.

As the Savior began his mortal ministry, he fasted for forty days. The Adversary confronted Him and tempted Him with the appetites of the flesh and recognition and power and prominence and prestige. The Savior rejected all of those temptations and, at the conclusion of that episode in the scriptures, in Matthew, chapter 4, it said that the Adversary leaveth Him and then that angels came and ministered to the Savior. Now, we won't do this here, now, but may I just invite you later today, get your copy of the New Testament, go the Matthew, chapter 4, find the verse that describes how the Adversary left and angels came and ministered to the Savior, but notice the little footnotes in that verse. Look down at the bottom of the page and pay careful attention to the Joseph Smith Translation of that same verse. Having fasted for forty days, and having had this encounter with the Adversary, it seems reasonable to me to conclude that the Savior would have been physically hungry and somewhat spiritually spent given these encounters and what He had endured and it would have been, indeed, helpful to have those angels come and minister to the Savior. But the Joseph Smith Translation makes this remarkable edit or change. It says that the Savior recognized that John the Baptist had been cast into prison and He, the Savior, sent angels to minister to John in prison. The angels did not come to minister to Christ, rather Christ sent the angels to minister to John, who had been cast in prison. Let me suggest that that episode, and many others just like it, shed light on the Character of Christ. Moral qualities and capacities strongly developed, consistently lived. In a moment when the Savior himself was hungry, himself, perhaps, was in need of spiritual assistance, in the midst of that need, instead of turning inward to what He wanted, He focused outward on someone else who was suffering so much less than He was suffering and He ministered to that individual. In other words, when you and I, as fallen men and women, natural men and women, would turn inward in self-absorption and, perhaps, self-pity and self-centeredness and selfishness, Jesus the Christ turned outward and ministered to other people in the midst of His own affliction. Let me suggest to you that that is the Character of Christ that underscores, that made possible, His infinite and eternal atoning sacrifice.

Now, I would invite you to study the New Testament and III Nephi and other scriptures to identify other examples of the Character of Christ. Let me give a few more—not too many that it will be all done—but enough that, maybe, you’ll want to go find some others on your own. Consider in the upper room, as the Savior institutes the Sacrament. This is just before He is to enter the Garden of Gethsemane and He prays for the Comforter. He prays for peace—not for Himself—but for other people. In anticipation of His greatest agony, He didn’t pray for Himself, He prayed for others. Consider that the Savior goes to the Garden of Gethsemane. He bids His three apostles, who accompanied Him, to stay awake and they fall asleep, repeatedly. I don’t think He was angry. I don’t think the Savior was upset. He may have been somewhat disappointed that, in that moment when He needed that assistance from His most devoted disciples, they couldn’t stay awake. He’s betrayed by Judas. So, in a relatively short period of time, four of the twelve apostles either don’t do what He asked them to do or one betrayed Him to the enemy, betrayed with a kiss. The betrayal occurs as the Savior is coming from the Garden of Gethsemane. The agony being so great that He sweat drops of blood having taken upon Him the sin, the iniquity, the sicknesses, and the pains of all human kind for all time and all eternity. Coming from that experience, betrayed by Judas with a kiss, a guard of the high priest comes and Peter draws his sword and cuts off the ear of the guard. Now, what I’m about to describe, I’ll only describe for myself. You just consider how you might have reacted. If I had just come from those experiences—which I could not have come from—if I had come from those experiences, experiencing that disappointment, that spiritual and physical agony, I would not have been worried about the high priest’s guard’s ear. But, what did the Savior do? He healed the guard’s ear. In the very moment of His greatest agony, He’s concerned about someone else who has suffered so much less than He has and He ministers to that individual.

On the cross the Savior is concerned about the welfare and the ongoing sustenance of His mother. “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34). And there was instruction to the two thieves on both sides as the Savior hung on the cross. Brothers and Sisters, I think the Character of Christ is to turn outward when the natural man and the natural woman in you and me turns inward. Instead of self-pity, self-absorption, selfishness, there is a turning out to minister to the needs of other people; to recognize, to respond to the needs of other people that are so much, perhaps, less than what we might be experiencing in our own life. That is the ultimate objective. That’s the outcome of the mighty change of heart. We are to become new creatures in Christ and as we continue along that pathway of continuing conversion, as we no longer have a desire to do evil but to do good continually, that mighty change of heart is a turn, a turn from looking inward to a turn outward. Just as that is the Character of Christ, as we become more deeply converted unto the Lord, then we turn not inward but outward. That is the Character of Christ which we are to emulate and acquire as we become more fully converted unto the Lord—not just to the Church, not just to the programs, not just to the people—converted unto the Lord, we experience the mighty change of heart and we seek to have in us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. I can think of nothing more demanding, more spiritually rigorous.

In fact, some of you may be listening to this description and thinking “I can’t do that!” and the answer is, “You’re right! You can’t, I can’t, alone, in our own strength.”

Third thought. First, was conversion unto the Lord. Second, is the Character of Christ which, as we become more fully converted through the power of the Holy Ghost and the Atonement of Christ, our capacity is enlarged to become more like the Savior and to emulate His character. We are not left alone. We do not achieve that spiritual outcome—that’s the purpose of mortality—we do not achieve that outcome simply through goal setting, self improvement, being disciplined, and setting goals. It, frankly to me, is sad to see so many members of The Church who understand that the Atonement of Christ can cleanse them from sin but , yet, do not understand that the Atonement of Christ provides spiritual strength and capacity to do the things that, in our limited mortal capacity, we could never do. King Benjamin taught (Mosiah 3:19),

19 “For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit...”

Now, Brothers and Sisters, please listen.

19 “...and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint [both of those] through the atonement of Christ the Lord...”

Putting off the natural man I would summarize as simply ‘Stop doing bad stuff!’ and the blessings of the Atonement can cleanse us and enables us to repent from the bad stuff that we have done. But it continues, “...and becometh a saint...”. Now there’s never a point where we just, “OK, I’m all totally done doing bad stuff.” We’re always repenting of bad stuff, but the bad stuff we’re repenting of ought to be changing and we should be becoming more and more saint-like, more and more sanctified, more and more receiving the Character of Christ, where we turn outward instead of inward. I remember when I served at BYU-Idaho, Elder Neal A Maxwell spoke at a Devotional. He gave his message. He sat down next to me on the stand when he was finished. He looked at me and he said, “David, I’m sorry. I just didn’t get off the launching pad today.” He had given one of the most masterful messages I had ever heard! When we got all done, I said, “Elder Maxwell, what did you mean you didn’t get off the launch pad today?” He said, “David, I just wasn’t at my best. I didn’t do very well. I apologize to you and the students.” I was dumbfounded. He was repenting of having not been as good as he thought he should have been. For him, the bad stuff was really good stuff and , in the course of his life, the bad things for which he was repenting, were changing, ever changing.

Well, Brothers and Sisters, we have ordinances and covenants that help us in the process of putting off the natural man and we have ordinances and covenants that help us in the process of becoming a saint through the Atonement of Christ the Lord. We can, both, be cleansed from sin

and strengthened to be better than we ever thought we could be—not in our own power; we must do all that we can do—but, in the strength of the Lord, by the power of His grace and through His Atonement, we can be strengthened beyond our own. We just sang that lyric (“How Firm A Foundation”, Hymn #85).

Now, I want to conclude by highlighting an episode that draws our attention to this strengthening power of the Lord’s Atonement. Conversion unto the Lord, the Character of Christ, and the strength that comes through the Savior’s Atonement. In Mosiah, chapter 24, Alma and his people are being persecuted by Amulon. Beginning in verse 13,

13 “And it came to pass that the voice of the Lord came to them in their afflictions, saying: Lift up your heads and be of good comfort, for I know of the covenant which ye have made unto me; and I will covenant with my people and deliver them out of bondage.”

Please note that the beginning of this blessing that is described in these verses, the beginning of the blessing is in covenants. Covenants and ordinances are central to receiving the fullness of the blessings of the Savior’s Atonement.

14 “And I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders,…”

Do you like the sound of that? ‘I will ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders.’ That sounds wonderful! And many times we think, “Oh good! He’s just going to make it go away!” Please listen,

14 “...I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs, even while you are in bondage; and this will I do that ye may stand as witnesses for me hereafter, and that ye may know of a surety that I, the Lord God do visit my people in their afflictions.

15 And now it came to pass that the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, the Lord did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord.”

What changed in that episode? The burden remained the same. The people were strengthened. Stronger people with the same burden felt that the burden was lighter. Now, Brothers and Sisters, there may be instances in our lives where we will pray and, miraculously, a burden may be removed. Indeed that happens. It is also the case that, if we are wise, we will pray, ‘nevertheless, not my will, but thy will be done’ and we will pray for the strength to learn the lesson that bearing the burden is intended to teach us. It will not always be the case that the

burden will be removed. In many instances, we can be strengthened through the Atonement of Christ to bear the burden with ease and, thereby, learn lessons we would never otherwise learn about acquiring the Character of Christ, about turning outward in the midst of our adversity instead of turning inward in self-centeredness, selfishness, self-pity, and self-absorption. Some lessons that are most vital to obtaining the Character of Christ can only be learned as we bear a burden.

Now, Brothers and Sisters, we are not alone. Of all the things that I know about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, first and foremost, I know that God is our Eternal Father. I know that Jesus the Christ is His Only Begotten Son. I know that the Father is the author of the Plan of Happiness and I know that the Lord Jesus Christ effectuated, or made operational through His Atonement, the Father's plan and that the Atonement can cleanse us from sin. It overcomes the effects of the Fall of Adam and Eve. It can cleanse us from our individual sins and it can strengthen us to do good and become better than we could ever do in our limited mortal capacity. I know that! Now, can I just tell you from the depths of my soul, I know that strengthening power is real because without it I would be absolutely helpless. Brothers and Sisters, I don't have what it takes to be a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. I don't have the capacity. I don't have the smarts. I don't have anything that it takes to be a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. But, in the strength of the Lord, with that capacity that comes through His Atonement, which we can be blessed to receive, then we can do anything that we need to do. I witness that power is real! I know. I testify. I am a witness that power is real, and, if I could have the wish of my heart today, it would be that you have an increased understanding that that blessing of the enabling, strengthening power, the grace of the Lord, that gift and blessing, is not reserved for those who serve in visible or responsible callings in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. That capacity and that gift is available to every single man, woman, child, member of this church; baptized by proper authority, having received the necessary ordinances, having entered into the covenants. That blessing is yours.

In this world in which we do now and, will yet, live, where it's going to get a lot darker and even more confused and chaotic, we ought not be afraid. We will not boast of our own strength, but we will boast of our God, for in His strength, we can do all things. I so witness and testify in the sacred name of Jesus Christ. Amen.