

D&C LESSON #7

“THE FIRST PRINCIPLES AND ORDINANCES OF THE GOSPEL”

By Ted L. Gibbons

INTRODUCTION: Every journey begins somewhere, with a step, a thought, a desire, a commitment. The journey back into the presence of God, for mortals, begins with four first steps—we call them the first principles and ordinances. There are others to follow—how many we have no idea . Joseph Smith said:

When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the Gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave. (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Section Six 1843–44, p.348)

Today we will discuss the first steps on the ladder, and why they are first. We must lay this foundation so solidly that we will never have to worry about it again—then we can go on to the remainder of the journey.

THEREFORE leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God . . . (Heb. 6:1)

1. FAITH IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST IS THE FIRST PRINCIPLE OF THE GOSPEL

In a stirring address given Sunday Morning, 8 October 2000, Pres. James E. Faust talked about the experiences of his life that led him to the testimony he now has. After describing some of those sweet experiences, he declared:

I humbly acknowledge that these many experiences have nurtured a sure knowledge that Jesus is our Savior and Redeemer. I have heard His voice and felt His influence and presence. They have been as a warm, spiritual cloak. The wonder of it is that all who conscientiously strive to keep the commandments and sustain their leaders can receive this same knowledge in some measure. (Ensign, Nov. 2000, p. 59)

These words echo the testimony of Enos, who told us

And after I, Enos, had heard these words, my faith began to be unshaken in the Lord; and I prayed unto him with many long strugglings for my brethren, the Lamanites. (Enos 1:11)

All this is reminiscent of the testimony of Jacob who taught

Wherefore, we search the prophets, and we have many revelations and the spirit of prophecy; and having all these witnesses we obtain a hope, and our faith becometh unshaken, insomuch that we truly can command in the name of Jesus and the very trees obey us, or the mountains, or the waves of the sea. (Jacob 4:6)

Jacob said of his meeting with Sherem,

And he had hope to shake me from the faith, notwithstanding the many revelations and the many things which I had seen concerning these things; for I truly had seen angels, and they had ministered unto me. And also, I had heard the voice of the Lord speaking unto me in very word, from time to time; wherefore, I could not be shaken. (Jacob 7:5)

The point is that we must nurture our faith in Christ by engaging in those activities that will strengthen that faith. We must make opportunities to partake of the fruits of the gospel. We must pray and study and read and bless and attend. As the Spirit brushes against day by day and week by week, we will discover that our faith cannot be shaken.

The description of faith in the 4th Article of Faith includes a descriptive comment. We are not just talking about *faith*, but about *faith in the Lord Jesus Christ*. And perhaps this means more than faith in his reality and in the truthfulness of his gospel. Perhaps our faith in him is actually our faith in his love, his mercy, his forgiveness, his long-suffering, his goodness, his atonement.

2. THROUGH SINCERE REPENTANCE, WE CAN PARTAKE OF THE BLESSINGS OF THE ATONEMENT

Repentance is more than giving up our sins. I knew a young lady many years ago who gave up immoral behavior four times in the same year. I saw the tears and heard her sincerity and sent her on to her bishop every time. I believe she felt awful and wanted to repent, wanted to stop. But something was missing. I think this process of repentance is very much like taking a bottle full of filth and putrescence and corruption, and exchanging it for a clean bottle, from which all the dirt has been washed away.

We leave the experience with a perfectly clean, and perfectly empty vessel. A vessel that must be filled with something.

And now, verily I say unto you, I, the Lord, will not lay any sin to your charge; go your ways and sin no more; but unto that soul who sinneth shall the former sins return, saith the Lord your God. (D&C 82:7)

Perhaps this is the meaning in the following parable:

When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth [it] empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last [state] of that man is worse than the first. Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation. (Matt. 12:43-45)

Ezekiel described the way in which we fill the bottle:

But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him: in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live. (Ezek. 18:21,22)

This is the key—we truly repent of our wickedness by turning to righteousness, by doing the works of righteousness.

Yea, come unto me and bring forth works of righteousness, and ye shall not be hewn down and cast into the fire— (Alma 5:35)

Elder Jay E. Jensen related this story he heard from another General Authority:

“A little over a year ago, I had the privilege of interviewing a young man to go on a mission. Because he had committed a major transgression, it was necessary for him under then-existing policy to be interviewed by a General Authority. When the young man came in, I said, ‘Apparently there’s been a major transgression in your life, and that has necessitated this interview. Would you mind telling me what the problem was? What did you do?’

“He laughed and said, ‘Well, there isn’t anything I haven’t done.’ I said, ‘Well, let’s be more specific then. Have you ... ?’ And then this General Authority began to probe with some very specific questions. The young man laughed again and said, ‘I told you, I’ve done everything.’

“I said, ‘How many times have you ...’ He said very sarcastically, ‘Do you think I numbered them?’ I said, ‘I would to God you could if you can’t.’ He said, again quite sarcastically, ‘Well, I can’t.’

“I said, ‘How about ...’ And then the General Authority probed in

another direction. He said, 'I told you. I've done everything.' I said, 'Drugs?' He said, 'Yes,' in a very haughty attitude. I said, 'What makes you think you're going on a mission then?' He said, 'I know I'm going. My patriarchal blessing says I'll go on a mission, and I've repented. I haven't done any of those things for this past year. I have repented, and I know I'm going on a mission.'

"I said, 'My dear friend, I'm sorry but you are not going on a mission. Do you think we could send you out with those clean, wholesome young men who have never violated the code? Do you think we could have you go out and boast and brag about your past? *You haven't repented; you have just stopped doing something.* (Jay E. Jensen, "Do You Know How to Repent?" New Era, Nov. 1999, pp.4, 6, emphasis added)

3.BAPTISM IS AN ESSENTIAL ORDINANCE

Once we have demonstrated our faith in Christ by repenting and initiating a life of righteousness, we are prepared to enter into a covenant relationship with the Savior. The evidence of that covenant is the immersion we call baptism.

Nephi not only describes the nature of the ordinance but the essence of the covenant. He tells us that the Savior was baptized to demonstrate to the Father that he would be obedient "according to the flesh." I believe that is what we covenant to do in the water—to do with our flesh, our mortality, whatever the Lord wants us to do.

Of course there are other purposes. Take a look at D&C 18:22; 49:13,14; 2 Nephi 31:7-13; Mosiah 18:8-10,17) What an honor and a privilege it is to enter into a covenant relationship with a God. But it is also a matter heavy with import. God is not fond of being mocked and those of us who have made the covenant ought to give serious attention to keeping it perfectly.

We live in a world that is not heavy into real commitment. We try to emphasize the importance of obligations with contracts and notary publics and lawyers and courts and so on, but there is something profound about the nature of this covenant. We can never say that we did not know what

we were agreeing to, as I have done on occasion with documents signed while buying a house or a car. No one can sneak a baptism past the one being baptized. And then we get the weekly reminder with the sacrament. We know we are bound to a sacred agreement with a God. It is probably for this reason that the requirements are so specific:

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)

It is also for this reason, I think, that the Lord accepts no substitutes. We must do it in his way and with his authority. Thus he can assure that we know the significance of what we have done.

1 Behold, I say unto you that all old covenants have I caused to be done away in this thing; and this is a new and an everlasting covenant, even that which was from the beginning. Wherefore, although a man should be baptized an hundred times it availeth him nothing, for you cannot enter in at the strait gate by the law of Moses, neither by your dead works. For it is because of your dead works that I have caused this last covenant and this church to be built up unto me, even as in days of old. Wherefore, enter ye in at the gate, as I have commanded, and seek not to counsel your God. Amen. (D&C 22;1-4)

4. THROUGH THE ORDINANCE OF CONFIRMATION, WE RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST

Joseph Smith said, "No man can receive the Holy Ghost without receiving revelations. The Holy Ghost is a revelator." (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p.328) We talked in a past lesson about some of the ways in which the Holy Spirit can manifest itself to us. Think of the nature of this gift the Lord has promised us if we are baptized worthily. The Holy Ghost is a

light that never needs changing (although sometimes we do). He is a guide that never takes time off from work. He is a teacher that knows all things (Moroni 10:5). 2 Nephi 32:5 tells us

For behold, again I say unto you that if ye will enter in by the way, and receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all things what ye should do.

All things! Abraham told us that the purpose of the creation of the earth was to prove us “herewith, to see if [we] will do all things whatsoever the Lord [our] God shall command [us]. (Abraham 3:25) With the Holy Ghost, we are enabled to know all things that we should do.

Look in the Topical Guide under *Holy Ghost*, *Mission of*, and review the dozens and dozens of things the Holy Ghost can do for the children of God.

5. WE MUST ENDURE TO THE END IN FAITH TO RECEIVE ETERNAL LIFE

The promptings of the Holy Ghost will help us to do this. At least, if we live worthily, we will always know what we need to do to endure in faith. I have been interested in the ways in which the Savior describes this requirement. In addition to telling us many times to endure to the end, we are commanded to “press forward with a steadfastness in Christ.” (2N31:20). In the D&C we are encouraged to “hold out faithful to the end” (D&C 6:13). Joseph Smith was told, “Hold on thy way.” (D&C 122:9) In other places the Lord says simply, “continue . . .” (D&C 42:60; 106:8, etc.)

The issue is not a matter of doing more good than bad so that the scales tip in our favor on the day of judgement. Rather, the Lord is concerned with what we are—what we have become through the choices of our lives. What we *are* when we meet him will matter much more than *what we have done*.

Our lives are made up of thousands of everyday choices. Over the years these little choices will be bundled together and show clearly what we value. (Elder. Boyd K. Packer, Ensign, Nov. 1980)

CONCLUSION: Nephi calls these first principles and ordinances the

Doctrine of Christ (see 2N31:2; 31:21; 32:6). How clearly they mark the path and point the way back to our heavenly home. I am certain that almost all of you who read this lesson have made your way through faith and repentance and baptism and have received the gift of the Holy Ghost. All that is left now is to live worthy of the manifestations of the Holy Ghost and to endure in obedience to those promptings.

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