

The Power of Self-Mastery

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Self-mastery ... is the ultimate test of our character.

1. Brethren, this evening we are part of history in the making. We are convened in the largest of all priesthood meetings ever held in any dispensation. We rejoice in the attendance of all of those beyond the great Conference Center numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Meeting for the first time in this new, grand edifice is a great moment in the history of humanity. We are indebted to the Lord, who inspired President Gordon B. Hinckley with the prophetic vision that brought about its construction and made it all possible. We thank Bishop H. David Burton, Bishop Richard C. Edgley, Bishop Keith B. McMullin, and all who have had anything to do with its construction. Now that we have it, we must use it to strengthen the faith of our people.
2. Tonight, brethren, I should like to speak about the power of self-mastery in its larger sense. Self-mastery is essential to invoke the power of the priesthood of God. This is because this great, divine agency can only be exercised in righteousness. Self-mastery requires self-determination and strength of character. It enhances our own gifts and talents in a remarkable way. It is the power of noble manhood.
3. Every human soul, especially priesthood holders, has the challenge of controlling his or her thoughts, appetites, speech, temper, and desires. One of these may be a bad temper. When I was a boy, I had red hair. At times my mother accused me of having a temper to go with it. They used to call me "Red." Those were fighting words. I think I have learned to control it. Those with red hair are not the only ones that must learn to control an unruly temper. Willpower is necessary so that irritations do not take over our emotions.
4. A local newspaper recently reported on a phenomenon accompanying the increased traffic on our roads: "It is the normal scenario of rush-hour traffic: honking, tailgating, obscene gestures. Even outright violence is on the increase in our driving." Sometimes tempers get out of control, and we call it "road rage." I have often wondered why some men's personalities change when they get behind the steering wheel of their car, secured by glass and metal. In some way this seems to excuse their rude behavior. Road rage is not caused by traffic congestion but by attitude. As some drivers become impatient and overaggressive, they may lose control and cause serious injury, even death, to others on the highway.
5. Self-mastery is a challenge for every individual. Only we can control our appetites and passions. Self-mastery cannot be bought by money or fame. It is the ultimate test of our character. It requires climbing out of the deep valleys of our lives and scaling our own Mount Everests.

6. As full-time missionaries we learn great lessons in self-mastery. We learn to get up when we should get up, to work when we should work, and to go to bed when we should go to bed. Full-time missionaries are generally admired and even respected, though their message may not be as well received as we would like. The First Presidency and others of the General Authorities meet with many heads of state, ambassadors, and ministers from all over the world. Frequently, when the subject comes up, these men of great power and influence speak with admiration and respect for the missionaries they have seen in their homelands.
7. Our young elders are models of young manhood. When they come home, some are criticized as being self-righteous for maintaining a decent appearance and keeping their hair trimmed neatly. I cannot understand why a returned missionary is considered self-righteous if he tries to live the standards and principles he has taught as a representative of the Lord to the people where he has served. Of course returned missionaries are not expected to wear white shirts and ties all of the time. But wearing sloppy clothes and weird hairstyles to supposedly look trendy is not proper for one who holds the divine commission of the priesthood. Returned missionaries are an example to the young men of the Aaronic Priesthood, who will be the future missionaries. Often that which is seen by the Aaronic Priesthood is more powerful
8. Men and women often attempt to gain notice and approval of the group from whom they seek acceptance. Such peer pressure may cause them to do things they would not otherwise do. This is acting out of weakness, not strength. The Lord promises us through Moroni: "And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them." 1
9. In its simplest terms, self-mastery is doing those things we should do and not doing those things we should not do. It requires strength, willpower, and honesty. As the traffic on the communications highway becomes a parking lot, we must depend more and more on our own personal moral filters to separate the good from the bad. Marvelous as it is in many ways, there is something hypnotic about using the Internet. I refer specifically to spending endless time in chat rooms or visiting the pornography sites.
10. I now turn to mastery of our own private thoughts. In this realm, conscience is the only referee that can blow the whistle when we get out of control. If not bridled, our thoughts can run wild. Our minds are a part of us that really require discipline and control. I believe reading the scriptures is the best washing machine for unclean or uncontrolled thoughts. For those who are eligible and worthy, the sanctity of the holy temple can lift our thoughts above the earthy.

11. When I was participating in athletics and served in the military, I heard expressions that made me ashamed to hear them. If, as Samuel Johnson suggested, “language is the dress of thought,”² then the language we are hearing on television, in the movies, and even in our schools is a poor commentary on our current thinking. I worry about young people becoming desensitized as they continually hear or use this bad language. I believe that the young man of character is not coarse in his speech. Holders of the holy priesthood of God should never use foul language or obscene gestures.
12. I now speak of the absolute necessity of controlling all physical appetites. These might in one sense be called the “thorn in the flesh.”³ Harry Emerson Fosdick provides an important context for self-control: “Self-denial ... is not the negative, forbidding thing that often we shake our heads about. In one sense there is no such thing as self-denial, for what we call such is the necessary price we pay for things on which our hearts are set.”⁴
13. One of the great foundations of personal power is purity. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, captured this when he penned, “My strength is as the strength of ten, / Because my heart is pure.”⁵ With all my heart I urge you wonderful young people not to take a secret shame with you to your marriage. You may never be able to forget it. You will want to go through life with the strength that comes from a clear conscience, which will permit you one day to stand before your Maker and say, “My soul is pure.” Self-denial is not restrictive. It is liberating. It is the pathway to freedom. It is strength. It is an essential element of purity. Shakespeare expressed it well through his character Hamlet:

Refrain to-night;
 And that shall lend a kind of easiness
 To the next abstinence, the next more easy;
 For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
 And either master the devil or throw him out
 With wondrous potency. ⁶

14. Heber J. Grant was the first President of the Church I had the privilege of meeting. He was truly a great man. We admired him because part of his strength was his great determination for self-mastery. His father died when he was only a year old, and his widowed mother struggled to raise him. He was conscientious in helping her and trying to take care of her.
15. “When he was older and wanted to join a baseball team, ... the other [boys laughed] at him, ... calling him a ‘sissy’ because he could not throw the ball between the bases. His teammates teased him so much that ... he ... made up his mind that he was going to play with the nine who would win the championship of the Territory of Utah. He purchased a baseball and practiced hour after hour, throwing at a neighbor’s old barn. Often his arm would ache so much he could hardly ... sleep at night. He kept on

practicing and ... improving and advancing from one team to another until he finally [succeeded] in playing [on] the team that won the territorial championship!" 7

16. Another example of his self-mastery was his determination to become a good penman. His penmanship was so bad that when two of his friends looked at it, one said, "That writing looks like hen tracks." "No," said the other, "it looks as if lightning has struck an ink bottle." This, of course, touched young Heber Grant's pride. While he was still in his teens as a policy clerk in the office of H. R. Mann and Co., "he was offered three times his salary to go to San Francisco as a penman. He later became a teacher of penmanship and bookkeeping at the University of [Utah]. In fact, with a specimen he had written before he turned seventeen, he took first prize in a territorial fair against four professional penmen." 8
17. Singing was another challenge for President Grant. As a small child, he could not carry a tune. When he was 10, a music instructor tried to teach him the simplest song and finally gave up in despair. At age 26, when he became an Apostle, he asked Professor Sims if he could teach him how to sing. After listening to him, Professor Sims replied, "Yes, you can learn to sing, but I would like to be forty miles away while you are doing it." This only challenged him to try harder. 9
18. President Grant one time said, "I have practiced on the 'Doxology' 10 between three and four hundred times, and there are only four lines, and I cannot sing it yet." 11 It is reported that on a trip to Arizona with Elder Rudger Clawson and Elder J. Golden Kimball, President Grant "asked them if he could sing one hundred songs on the way. They thought he was joking and said, 'Fine, go right ahead.' After the first forty, they assured him if he sang the other sixty they would both have a nervous breakdown. He sang the other sixty." 12
19. By practicing all of his life he made some improvement in singing but perhaps not as much as in baseball and penmanship, which he mastered. President Grant had a favorite quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson which he lived by: "That which we persist in doing becomes easier for us to do; not that the nature of the thing itself is changed, but that our power to do is increased."
20. As priesthood holders, we should not look for excuses when we lose our self-control. Even though our circumstances may be challenging, we can all strive for self-mastery. Great blessings of personal satisfaction come from doing so. Self-mastery is related to spirituality, which is the central quest of mortality. As President David O. McKay once said: "Spirituality is the consciousness of victory over self, and of communion with the Infinite. Spirituality impels one to conquer difficulties and acquire more and more strength. To feel one's faculties unfolding and truth expanding the soul is one of life's sublimest experiences." 13 As a hopeless cripple, William Ernest Henley courageously looked beyond his outward physical condition to triumph in his heart and mind when he wrote "Invictus":

INVICTUS

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance,
I have not winced nor cried aloud:
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed. ...

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul. 14

21. Brethren, I testify with all my heart and soul that through the power of self-mastery we will inherit the blessings our Heavenly Father has for his faithful sons. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.