

# Desires, Character, and Principle-Based Decision Making

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**A**fter Lehi received the vision of the tree of life and shared it with his family, Nephi said, “I, Nephi, was *desirous* also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things” (1 Nephi 10:17; emphasis added in this and other scriptures). Nephi’s desire motivated him to seek diligently to draw nearer to God and to ponder the teachings of his father (see 1 Nephi 10:17–19). In time, he was taken “into an exceedingly high mountain” where the Spirit asked, “What *desirest* thou?” Nephi answered, “I *desire* to behold the things which my father saw” (1 Nephi 11:1–3). Nephi’s righteous desires and actions enabled him to receive a vision of the tree of life and to partake of its fruit—to feel “the love of God, . . . the most *desirable* above all things” (1 Nephi 11:21–23).

People sometimes equate desires with wishes. But desires are not wishes. Wishes are fleeting and transitory; desires are not. Desires are

deeper and longer lasting. Desires are longings or cravings. We are ultimately the products of our desires. Desires influence the choices we make, how we use our time and resources, and the order of our priorities. They affect the sacrifices we are willing to make. They reveal what we believe will bring us happiness and success. What we consistently desire reveals what we love most, as Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “What we insistently desire, over time, is what we will eventually become and what we will receive in eternity.”<sup>1</sup> The prophet Alma added, “[God] granteth unto men according to their desire, whether he desireth good or evil, life or death, joy or remorse of conscience” (Alma 29:4–5).

C. S. Lewis observed: “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’”<sup>2</sup> This chapter will explore how the proper training of desires can foster the development of righteous character and increase the ability to make consistent principle-based decisions in harmony with the will of God.

## Training Our Desires

To “become our allies instead of our enemies,” desires must be educated and trained.<sup>3</sup> For example, many people have trained their desires to crave junk food and dessert rather than fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Others prefer little or no exercise to regular exercise or favor leisure over work. Many have trained themselves to be satisfied with mediocrity instead of yearning for excellence. Some have conditioned their desires to follow the commandments only when others are watching. Those desires are the result of training over time. The more we feed a desire, the stronger it becomes, whether for righteousness and the things of God or for wickedness and the things of the world. “It is our own desires,” Elder Maxwell points out, “which determine the sizing

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1. Neal A. Maxwell, “According to the Desire of [Our] Hearts,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 21.
  2. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 75.
  3. Maxwell, “According to the Desire of [Our] Hearts,” 21.

and the attractiveness of various temptations.”<sup>4</sup> To become like God and to dwell with Him, we must learn to want what God wants and to do what He would have us do. We must learn to “hate the evil, and love the good” (Amos 5:15). How do we do that? Let me suggest three ways:

*First, we must know, understand, and accept the truth.* The Savior promised, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31–32). Truth, Jacob taught, is knowledge of “things as they *really* are, and of things as they *really* will be” (Jacob 4:13). No one who believes or lives a lie is ever really free. Desires reveal what we believe is acceptable or unacceptable, right or wrong, justifiable or unjustifiable. To educate and train our desires, we must first know the truth, understand it correctly, and become personally convinced it is “things as they *really* are.”

However, knowing truth is not all that is required to train our desires; we must accept truth. I may know eating healthy food and exercising regularly are wise. I may know the Lord’s counsel to “retire to thy bed early, that ye may not be weary; arise early, that your bodies and your minds may be invigorated” (D&C 88:124). I may even understand how to do these things. But unless I accept those truths as possible and right for me now, I am not likely to make the effort to do these things now. Knowing, understanding, and accepting the truth can make the difference between doing what is right because we want to and doing what is right because we have to. A former colleague of mine knew all about the importance of a healthy diet, regular exercise, and adequate rest. He just did not want to do those things. It was not until he had a massive heart attack and was told by a doctor he either had to eat right, exercise, and get sufficient rest or he would die that he began training his desires for those good habits.

Korihor believed man “fared,” or succeeded, in life by his own “genius” and “strength.” To him, strict humanism was the truth. So, he trusted in the arm of flesh. There was no God and no right or wrong. Whatever man did, or felt he needed to do, to succeed was acceptable (see Alma 30:17). Ethics and morality were self-determined. There was

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4. Maxwell, “According to the Desire of [Our] Hearts,” 21.

“no harm” in “committing a little sin,” cheating, lying a little, or taking advantage of others (2 Nephi 28:8).

If people train their desires around this nihilistic view of truth, over time they may begin to call “evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness” (Isaiah 5:20). While most Latter-day Saints do not seem to reach that point, I have observed many give in to the temptation to say, “Well, maybe what I am about to do isn’t really *right*, but I don’t think you could say it is really *wrong* either, especially when compared to what the rest of the world is doing.” As Latter-day Saints, we acknowledge we must be in the world, but we are counseled not to be of the world. Satan tempts us to believe that in the real world we must compromise our standards if we want to compete professionally. Otherwise, Satan says the world will have an unfair advantage over us, and we won’t have a chance.

In “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” we are taught that we came to this earth to gain experience to help us “progress toward perfection.”<sup>5</sup> Sin, in any degree, causes regression or digression. The truth is, God “cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance” (D&C 1:31), and “no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of heaven” (Alma 11:37). To do something dishonest, immoral, or unethical in order to achieve higher grades, to receive a degree, to obtain a better job, or to gain a promotion is like taking one step forward and two steps backward. Each time we do it, we move further away from our goal of perfection. “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36).

As a young boy living in Jerusalem, Daniel was taken captive into Babylon. Identified as a young man of great potential, with a promising future, he was taken into the king’s inner circle for training. King Nebuchadnezzar required all his protégés to partake of his meat and wine. Understanding the impact that not partaking might have on his future, Daniel “purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself” by eating the king’s meat and drinking the king’s wine (Daniel 1:8). He

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5. The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.

would not sacrifice his progress toward perfection to fulfill a desire for worldly success. He asked the prince for ten days to prove that holding to his convictions would make him healthier than the rest. Ten days later, his countenance “appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king’s meat” (Daniel 1:15). Even more important, Daniel increased in “knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams” (Daniel 1:17). Other tests of integrity would follow for Daniel. But his determination to put God first in his life enabled him to be “preferred above the presidents and princes, because an excellent spirit was in him” (Daniel 6:3). Sometimes we focus too much on what we hope the Lord will do *for* us. Perhaps we should think more about what He will do *with* us and *through* us if we make Him the center of our lives.

*Second, to educate and train our desires, we must live the truth.* Ability and desire are two different things. Ability comes from doing, from acting upon our desires. It is often said that knowledge is power, but more is required. “Knowledge is Power,” wrote Elder James E. Talmage, “providing that by ‘knowledge’ we mean *application*, and not merely mental possession, of truth.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, to know the truth and not live it brings us under greater condemnation. The more we live a truth, the more we become convinced of that truth, and the truth becomes easier to live. Our momentum builds. That is especially important when significant tests of integrity come to us. President Boyd K. Packer told of one such test in his life:

A number of years ago, professors from Harvard University who were members of the Church invited me to lunch over at the Harvard Business School faculty dining room. They wanted to know if I would join them in participating in a new publication; they wanted me to contribute to it.

They were generous in their compliments, saying that because I had a doctorate a number of people in the Church would listen to me, and, being a General Authority (at that

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6. James E. Talmage, *Vitality of Mormonism* (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1919), 277.

time I was an Assistant to the Twelve), I could have some very useful influence.

I listened to them very attentively but indicated at the close of the conversation that I would not join them. I asked to be excused from responding to their request. When they asked why, I told them this: “When your associates announced the project, they described how useful it would be to the Church—a niche that needed to be filled. And then the spokesman said, ‘We are all active and faithful members of the Church; *however, . . .*’”

I told my two hosts that if the announcement had read, “We are all active and faithful members of the Church; *therefore, . . .*” I would have joined their organization. I had serious questions about a “however” organization. I have little worry over a “therefore” organization.

That *however* meant that they put a condition upon their Church membership and their faith. It meant that they put something else first. It meant that they were to judge the Church and gospel and the leaders of it against their own backgrounds and training. It meant that their commitment was partial, and partial commitment is not enough to qualify one for full spiritual light.<sup>7</sup>

As we move out into the professional world all across the world and face our own tests of integrity, the condition of our desires will largely determine our responses to challenges. If our desires have been trained according to the interests of the natural man, if we have learned to crave the world’s acceptance and acclaim or to justify sin to get what we want, our response may well be, “I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. I know the truth and I know what is right; *however . . .*” On the other hand, if our desires have been trained to put off the natural man and to want what God wants, if our longing is to please God above all others, our response will be, “I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. I know the truth and I know what is right; *therefore . . .!*”

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7. Boyd K. Packer, “The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect,” in *Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 113–14.

Thomas Carlyle taught, “Conviction is worthless unless it is converted into conduct.”<sup>8</sup>

*Third, to educate and train our desires, we must love the truth.* Returning once again to our examples of eating healthy food and exercising regularly, many people enjoy these habits, once established. They look forward to eating healthy food and exercising. They prefer healthy food over the alternatives. They no longer incorporate those unhealthy patterns into daily life simply because they feel they shouldn’t. They truly desire and love to lead a healthy lifestyle. In the same manner, people who train themselves to love honesty, integrity, and morality grow to love and desire these virtues. When practice becomes habit, they prefer honesty, integrity, and morality over the alternatives.

We cannot love truth that we do not know, and we will not love truth that we do not live. President Brigham Young said: “It is evident that many who understand the truth do not govern themselves by it. . . . Take this whole people: they know that ‘Mormonism’ is true as well as they know that the sun now shines; their judgments, their feelings, and their hearts convince them that it is true. . . . Do you think that people will obey the truth because it is true, unless they love it? No, they will not. Truth is obeyed when it is loved.”<sup>9</sup>

President Ezra Taft Benson observed, “When obedience ceases to be an irritant and becomes our quest, in that moment God will endow us with power.”<sup>10</sup> Many words, such as *honesty*, *integrity*, and *sacrifice* could be appropriately substituted for the word *obedience* in President Benson’s declaration, and the same principle and promise would hold true. By knowing, living, and loving the truth, our desires can be educated and trained; our hearts can be changed (see Alma 19:23). We can lose all disposition to do evil and desire only to do good continually (see Mosiah 5:2).

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8. Thomas Carlyle, as quoted in James E. Faust, *To Reach Even Unto You* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 12.

9. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1860), 7:55.

10. Ezra Taft Benson, as quoted in Donald L. Staheli, “Obedience—Life’s Great Challenge,” *Ensign*, May 1998, 82.

## Developing Righteous Character

In 1819, Washington Irving published a short story about a likable but lazy man named Rip Van Winkle, who spent his days avoiding work and responsibility, conversing meaninglessly, and carousing with friends. He much preferred to “starve on a penny than work for a pound.”<sup>11</sup> His selfish, carnal desires had made him weak. Irritated by “his idleness, his carelessness, and the ruin he was bringing on his family,” his wife nagged him “morning, noon, and night” to make something of himself. Concluding there was no other way to escape the constant badgering of his wife and maintain his lazy lifestyle, Rip Van Winkle left his little village and wandered into the Catskill Mountains. After a series of adventures, he decided to take a well-deserved nap under a shady tree. He awoke twenty years later and discovered his world had changed. His wife was dead, and all his former friends had either been killed in the Revolutionary War or had moved away. His misdirected pursuit of a self-defined heaven became, at least for a time, a personal hell. William James, the noted American psychologist and philosopher, wrote:

The hell to be endured hereafter, of which theology tells, is no worse than the hell we make for ourselves in this world by habitually fashioning our characters in the wrong way. Could the young but realize how soon they will become mere walking bundles of habits, they would give more heed to their conduct while in the plastic state. We are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone. Every smallest stroke of virtue or of vice leaves its never so little scar. . . . Rip Van Winkle . . . excuses himself for every fresh dereliction by saying, “I won’t count *this* time!” Well, he may not count it, . . . but it is being counted none the less. Down among his nerve-cells and fibres the molecules are counting it, registering and storing it up to be used against him when the next temptation comes.<sup>12</sup>

Rip Van Winkle’s continual rationalization prevented him from choosing the right course of action when faced with temptation, op-

11. Washington Irving, *Rip Van Winkle* (New York: F. A. Stokes, 1933), 27.

12. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1899), 1:127.



position, and pressure. So it is with many in the world. “Some want to be free to choose,” wrote Elder Maxwell, “but to [also] have God ever poised to rescue them. They want to call on God in their extremities, but don’t want Him to interfere with their sensualities. They demand an undemanding God. . . . They desire permissiveness without the consequences of permissiveness.”<sup>13</sup>

How is righteous character developed? Elder Richard G. Scott explained:

Getting through the hazards of life requires understanding, skill, experience, and self-assurance like that required to sink a difficult basket under pressure. In the game of life, that is called righteous character. *Such character is not developed in moments of great challenge or temptation. That is when it is used.* Character is woven quietly from the threads of hundreds of correct decisions (like practice sessions). When strengthened by obedience and worthy acts, correct decisions form a fabric of character that brings victory in time of great need.<sup>14</sup>

A Christlike character is grown by planting the seeds of good desires and then nourishing those seeds with consistent daily acts of faith and righteousness. For example, the ability to consistently hit 95-mile-per-hour fastballs takes significant time, practice, and dedication. Anyone who has developed this ability and knows what it takes would laugh to hear others predict that they could consistently hit 95-mile-per-hour fastballs after only a few weeks of practice. That expectation is naïve and unrealistic, if not impossible. The development of character is no different than the development of batting skills. The ability to make “difficult, extremely important decisions correctly”<sup>15</sup> in our careers is being developed right now. Students who naïvely believe that, without practice, they will be able to do in the future what they cannot do now

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13. Neal A. Maxwell, *Men and Women of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 5.

14. Richard G. Scott, “Trust in the Lord,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 35; emphasis added.

15. Scott, “Trust in the Lord,” 35.

will someday be caught by a 95-mile-per-hour fastball right between the eyes!

A fully developed moral character will always be a boon to its possessor. Consider the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, who was entrusted with guardianship over Potiphar's house and holdings. Over a period of time, Potiphar's wife made many attempts to seduce Joseph. Joseph repeatedly resisted. Nevertheless, Potiphar's wife was relentless in her lustful pursuits. Determined to have Joseph, she caught hold of his garment. Joseph immediately fled. He was of course apprehended, arrested, and imprisoned. However, eventually Joseph's strength of character made him one of the most powerful, exemplary, and respected leaders in Egypt, and he was instrumental in the temporal salvation of Israel. Joseph's ability to make the right decision in a dramatic moment of temptation was developed by having made hundreds of smaller choices to resist temptation and do the right thing.

Besides temptations to compromise ethical values, temptations and tests of moral character also come to many in the workplace through Internet pornography, flirtations between married employees, and even extramarital affairs. The poet Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us."<sup>16</sup> When faced with temptation, the character that lies within us rises to the surface.

In 1984 a Latter-day Saint baseball player, Harmon "The Killer" Killebrew, was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Killebrew played twenty-two seasons in the major leagues and finished with a total of 573 home runs, then fifth on the all-time list. During his career he led the American League in home runs six times, including during his first full season in the majors. He was named league MVP in 1969. He made the All-Star team many times during his career, at three different positions: third base, first base, and outfield.

Shortly after his induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame, one writer said: "The Killer [just] didn't fit the traditional mold of so many

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16. Ralph Waldo Emerson, as quoted in James E. Faust, "Womanhood: The Highest Place of Honor," *Ensign*, May 2000, 95.

enshrined in Cooperstown. He didn't hit for breathtaking batting averages . . . his career average was a mere .256. . . . He was no jackrabbit on the bases; he stole 19 in twenty-two seasons. . . . He didn't dazzle anyone with his glove; he played three positions without ever winning even a Pyrite Glove, much less real gold. He wasn't even a colorful character, just a modest, nice guy who came to work, did his job, and went home to his wife and children."<sup>17</sup> One of Killebrew's teammates observed: "This team without Killebrew is like dressing up for a formal affair with white tie and tails and then wearing muddy shoes. . . . Harmon puts us all in bigger shoes and adds a sparkle of polish. We feel like we are among the best with him in the lineup, because one of the best is one of us."<sup>18</sup> Men and women of integrity have that kind of influence upon other people. The righteous character they have developed inspires others to be better.

### **Principle-Based Decision Making**

A father once solicited the help of his son in plowing their fields. As the son climbed on the tractor, he asked his father the secret to plowing straight rows. His father told him he must pick an object at the end of each row, keep his eyes fixed on that object, and plow toward it. At the end of the day, the father returned to survey his son's work. He was shocked to discover all the rows were crooked. "What happened?" he asked. "I did exactly what you told me to do," was the reply. "Then, how do you explain the crooked rows?" questioned the father. "Well, I never took my eyes off the cow," the son answered, "but that doggone animal kept moving."

Principles are guidelines that govern conduct. True principles remain steady and unvarying. They are constants. Circumstances, on the other hand, like the position of the cow, change. Unless we are "grounded" (Colossians 1:23) and "rooted" (Colossians 2:7) in correct principles and faith, we may give way to the pressures of the moment when tests of

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17. John Thorn and Pete Palmer, eds., *Total Baseball* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), s.v. "Harmon Killebrew."

18. Donald Honig, *The Power Hitters* (New York: Gramercy, 1993), 179.

character come and difficult decisions must be made. Elder Scott explained the difference between decisions based upon circumstance and decisions based upon eternal truth:

The guiding principle in the pattern of *decisions based upon circumstance* is to make choices according to the outcome desired rather than upon what is right or wrong. There is no use of an underlying set of standards to consistently guide those decisions. Each choice is made upon what appears to give the most desired result now. . . .

In time, one who makes decisions based upon circumstance is virtually assured to commit serious transgressions. There is no iron rod of truth to keep that person in the right way. He will continually be faced with many subtle temptations to make deviations from the commandments. Those choices are justified by arguing that they are not that bad, that they are more socially acceptable and provide a broader base of friends. A clever individual without foundation principles can at times acquire, temporarily, impressive accomplishments. Yet that attainment is like a sand castle. When the test of character comes, it crumbles, often taking others with it.

The second pattern, making *decisions based upon eternal truth*, is the pattern of the Lord. It will always lead you to make decisions guided by His plan of happiness. Such decisions are centered in doing what is right, not in first deciding the result desired. Choosing to do what the Lord has defined as right will, in the long run, always lead to the best outcomes. However, that pattern may require you to set aside something you very much desire now for a great future good.<sup>19</sup>

C. S. Lewis compared principles turned to habit to a rope: “You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it

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19. Richard G. Scott, “The Power of Righteousness,” *Ensign*, November 1998, 68.

to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover how much you really trusted it?"<sup>20</sup>

We may not discover how much we really "believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men" (Articles of Faith 1:13) until we face the possibility that our integrity might result in a lower grade, rejection from a desired program or graduate school, or perhaps the loss of a job. We will face many circumstances that will test the depth of our beliefs and reveal where our highest and truest loyalty is centered—in God, in ourselves, or in people of power and influence in the world.

As he watched the gradual annihilation of his people at the hands of the Lamanites, Mormon wrote an epistle to his son Moroni and painfully acknowledged the degenerate condition of the Nephites: "They have lost their love, one towards another; and they thirst after blood and revenge continually. . . . They are without principle, and past feeling" (Moroni 9:5, 20). Filled with anger, the Nephites abandoned the principles of truth, reacted to the circumstances of war, and were eventually destroyed.

Circumstances can make it very difficult to do the right thing. It is hard to not fear how the world can hurt us. But if our desires have been trained to want what God wants and if we have labored persistently to become men and women of righteous character, we will be able to make decisions based upon eternal truth rather than upon circumstances. We will take counsel from our faith rather than from our fears.

Facing the most difficult decision of His life, Jesus entered the Garden of Gethsemane, "fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." Even in the midst of that unfathomable ordeal, the Savior was concerned for the well-being of His disciples. He went to see how they were doing. Then He returned a second time into that most holy of holies and knelt in prayer, saying, "O my Father, if this cup

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20. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 22–23.

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may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done” (Matthew 26:39–40, 42).

Undeterred by the extremity of the circumstances, the Lamb of God selflessly acted in complete harmony with the will of the Father and in perfect accord with eternal truth. His desires were righteous; His character, perfect; His obedience, unconditional; His mortal mission, complete. Later the Resurrected Lord commissioned His disciples to go into all the world. He charged His disciples then and He charges us now to “be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48). His promise to the faithful is sure: “Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20). Further: “Mine eyes are upon you. I am in your midst. . . . Wherefore, gird up your loins and be prepared. . . . The enemy shall not overcome” (D&C 38:7, 9).

The professional world is very competitive, often confusing, and sometimes unsettling. When tests of true discipleship come, as they surely will, men and women who have consistently and persistently trained their desires toward holiness and developed righteous character will have the ability to make difficult decisions based on divinely inspired principles. They will stand approved before the Lord.