

## WITH HOLINESS OF HEART



AS MOST OF YOU KNOW BY NOW, I was recently called to serve as a mission president beginning in late June. As the call was extended, and in the days since, the words of a poignant prayer by Alma have come forcefully to my mind and heart as they often do when I am asked to fulfill Church callings or give priesthood blessings. I have echoed many times the cry of Alma as he enters the water to baptize Helam: “O Lord, pour out thy Spirit upon thy servant, that he may do this work with holiness of heart” (Mosiah 18:12). It has occurred to me that Alma’s moving, heartfelt prayer may apply to all of us as we “do this work” here at BYU. For we too need the Lord to pour out his Spirit upon us in our labors. After all, teaching with the Spirit of God is the founding prophetic imperative given by Brigham Young to Karl G. Maeser.<sup>32</sup> As such, it is a mandate that has rested upon all faculty ever since. Hence, we may well begin our daily labors at BYU with the prayer, “O Lord, pour out thy Spirit upon thy servants, that we may do this work with holiness of heart.”

It is no easy task to labor in the academy, or elsewhere for that matter, with complete holiness of heart. When I think about this spiritual task, I recall a book by Søren Kierkegaard whose thesis is captured in its title, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*. In it, Kierkegaard traces the many tangled ways that we can be double-minded in our desires.<sup>33</sup> As fallen, imperfect beings, it is the project of a lifetime to learn to seek the

Lord and his righteousness with singleness of heart. We typically pursue the Good with one eye on God's will and his righteousness, and another on our will and our rewards. In the academy, such double-mindedness is manifest in the desire not simply to bless but to impress.

I have mentioned before an experience Jane Tompkins recounts in her memoir, *A Life in School*, in which she recognizes the devastating effects of such duplicity. The product of an elite education, Tompkins spent her life in school performing brilliantly, first as a student at Bryn Mawr and Yale and then as a professor at Duke. In a moment of crucial self-understanding, however, she realized that her stellar performance had been just that: a performance. While rushing to class one day, she was confronted with the painful realization that her focus that day, and throughout her entire life in school, had been on trying to look good, rather than being good:

I had always thought that I was helping my students understand the material we were studying.... As a result of that moment I realized that what I had actually been concerned with was showing the students how smart I was.... I had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help students learn, as I had thought, but to perform before them in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me.<sup>34</sup>

I suspect that many, if not all, of us have caught ourselves falling into this same pitfall. Pride and envy are endemic spiritual hazards to life in the academy and to the pursuit of excellence generally. Moreover, few fallen mortals in any profession live entirely void of self-regard or perform their work with unadulterated singleness of purpose. Still our aspiration and constant prayer should be that the Lord assist us toward this end, imperfect though we are. And as we beseech him to pour out his Spirit upon us, his finger can etch ever more deeply into the fleshy tables of our hearts "Holiness to the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:3). These words should be engraved not only on our sanctuaries but on our souls.

May we adopt Alma's heartfelt plea as a prayer to guide our professional work at BYU as well as our personal daily walk as disciples: "O Lord, pour out thy Spirit upon thy servants, that we may do this work with holiness of heart."