

The Garment of Praise

Twenty years ago, while serving as a missionary in Milan, I did something unusual—at least for me. I wrote a letter of praise to my district leader, telling him how much I admired the compassion, kindness, and energy with which he led our district and loved the people in our area. This district leader had begun his mission as a whip-smart but bitterly sarcastic young man. He was confused about life and cynical about his missionary experience. But the miracle of conversion had transformed him into a new creature in Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:17; Mosiah 27:26). By the time I served with him, he was a powerful, conscientious, and consecrated servant of the Lord, and in my letter I tried to tell him so.

I wasn't used to writing such notes; I still do so too rarely. I was inspired back then by an old Church magazine article in which Elder Neal A. Maxwell invoked Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah would "give . . . the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness" (Isa. 61:3). Elder Maxwell suggested that we can all do more to cloak one another in the garment of praise. The teaching touched my heart, and I decided to give it a try. I wrote a letter to my district leader and slipped it into the pages of his scriptures.

I later learned that he found the letter at a crucial moment, and with profound consequences not only for him but for a young man he was teaching—a young man who was later baptized. The Lord, I felt, had honored my faltering effort to extend the garment of praise.

In a remarkable devotional poem, Christopher Smart (1722-1771) salutes King David as God's "minister of praise at large."¹ Since that missionary experience twenty years ago, I have

yearned to become such a minister of praise without portfolio. Some of my sweetest moments have come through trying, however feebly, to honor the two great commandments by praising my God and commending my neighbor.

Such moments have been too rare. Praise does not come naturally to me. I crave praise but do not instinctively bestow it. Perhaps I am not the only academic who struggles with this. For good reason the Latin tag *invidia academica*—academic envy or enmity—has been around for centuries. When colleagues or classmates succeed—whether with grades or grants, prizes or publications—I must sometimes suppress an initial twinge of envy. It is hard to see others singled out for commendation without feeling somehow singled out for censure.²

And yet I know, whenever this happens, that "these things ought not so to be" (James 3:10). Certainly not at BYU. Academic envy might be a natural response, but it is the response of the natural man. Envy fuels enmity, and enmity is "the central feature of pride," which is "the great stumbling block to Zion."³ If BYU is to become the prophesied "school in Zion" (D&C 97:3), we must overcome envy.

I believe we can overcome it through praise. We can commend our colleagues, salute our staff, and extol our students. My life was transformed at critical junctures by timely praise from beloved teachers. Perhaps yours was too.

Isaiah proclaims that the Messiah offers "the garment of praise" wherever he finds "the spirit of heaviness" (Isa. 61:3). There is much heaviness on our campus and in our world. We can alleviate some of that heaviness through sincere praise, thus honoring our covenant commitment "to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light" (Mosiah 18:8).

In this we can follow the Savior, “the messenger of the covenant” (Mal. 3:1), the eternal Minister of praise at large. The Savior praises His Father, constantly and joyfully, as the Guardian of the sparrows, the Gardener of the lilies, and the Giver of all good gifts (see Mathew 5-7). Christ also tenderly commends His mortal servants, often less for their outward successes than for the condition of their hearts (see, e.g., D&C 124:15, 20). He has no greater desire in all eternity than to

welcome each child of God home with a single-sentence salutation: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21).

I hope that in this, as in all else, we can praise Him by imitating Him. May BYU become a “community of praise at large.” May we all, at mortality’s close, graduate *summa cum laude*—as givers, not recipients only, of heaven’s highest praise.

¹ Christopher Smart, “A Song to David,” lines 13-14.

² See Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Other Prodigal,” *Ensign*, May 2002.

³ Ezra Taft Benson, “Beware of Pride,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 4, 7.