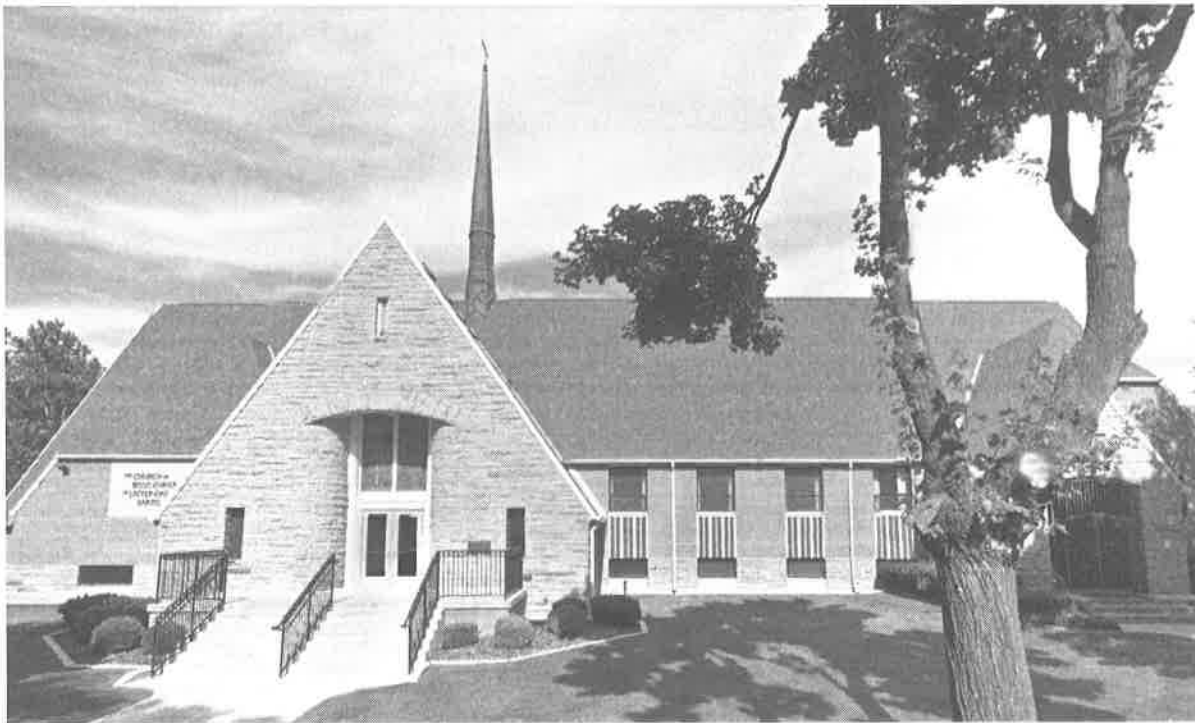


From Our Ward: Love the Poor and Needy

by Geoff Nelson | Jun 22, 2017 | Book of Mormon, Charity, Compassion, covenants, Featured, Gospel Topics, Humanity, Mormonism, Policy, unity | 0 comments



This talk was given in the Stratford East Ward in Salt Lake City on June 18th, 2017.

Good morning brothers and sisters. We were asked to speak about our favorite Book of Mormon scripture. I have a hard time picking a favorite. In general. Just ask my wife sometime what my favorite pie is.

As I thought about what passage, or passages to choose to focus on, I ultimately decided to talk about passages from the Book of Mormon that have produced the biggest paradigm shifts in my worldview. Passages that at some point in reading them, really sank in and changed how I viewed and interacted with the world. There are several, but I decided to talk about four of them today, and I think that they are all related to a degree, like variations on a theme. The passages are Mormon 8:35-39, Mosiah 18:8-9, 3 Nephi 28:3-10, and Mosiah 2:17.

So first, Mormon 8. Before reading it, I'd like to give some context. I don't think I'm unique in mentally dismissing criticism directed towards me. It is an unfortunate human condition, part of the "natural man." It is easy for us to do this. Part of this is also cultural. I've heard it said before that the messages in the Relief Society session of conference are often praising the sisters, but many sisters think "I'm not doing all of those things" and leave thinking they're not

doing enough. Meanwhile sometimes the messages in Priesthood session can really upbraid the brethren, but many men think “that doesn’t apply to me” and leave thinking they’re doing well. In any case, I think that this passage in Mormon (8:35-37 & 39) can be one that many of us want to avoid internalizing. It reads:

Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing. And I know that ye do walk in the pride of your hearts; and there are none save a few only who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of very fine apparel, unto envying, and strifes, and malice, and persecutions, and all manner of iniquities; and your churches, yea, even every one, have become polluted because of the pride of your hearts. For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted... Why do ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick and the afflicted to pass by you, and notice them not?

Moroni is very specific here. He is talking to us. He is talking to all of us Mormons. We’re the ones reading the Book of Mormon, and this is 100% addressed to us. Virtually all of us are called out for pride, for pricey clothing, and all manner of iniquity. He does add the qualifier “save a few only,” but I’m guessing that like the Relief Society sisters, those “few only” are probably going to go away thinking that they should do better. Interestingly he doesn’t give the same qualifier when he calls out our church. “Your churches, yeah, even every one, have become polluted.” Again, he’s addressing us. He says “you do love... the adorning of your churches more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted.”

I’ve had friends criticize the church for how much money it spends on temples while it has over 100,000 children who are members of record that are malnourished. As an aside, that number is accurate by the way. The Liahona Children’s Foundation is an organization that was created nearly a decade ago. It goes to Stakes in developing nations and screens the children for malnutrition. Malnutrition can result in physical and mental impairments which remain throughout the child’s life. The cost of preventing such cognitive (and physical) impairment is surprisingly modest. The Liahona Children’s Foundation is able to provide the nutritional supplements for a child from 6 to 72 months (6 years old) for around \$400 total. If you’re looking for a worthwhile charity, I’d recommend it. The church is currently in talks with the LCF and hopefully will either develop a partnership with them or replace them with a church-run program.

Back to Moroni’s comments. I wonder, given the language Moroni uses, if the fact that golden statues of himself adorn the tops of virtually all of our temples added to his frustration with our pride. However, we don’t have to interpret the passage as a condemnation of the adorning of our churches, but we must interpret it as a severe condemnation of our priorities. I was very happy in December of 2009 when the church expanded the three-fold mission of the church to the four purposes of the church by adding “caring for the poor and needy.” Unfortunately, since that has occurred I’ve had a few lessons at church which were entirely focused on the three-fold mission. It seems that many members don’t even know that the church added “caring for the poor and needy” to the list.

One last story about adorning our churches vs the poor and needy. I have terrible exercising habits, by which I mean, I rarely exercise. When Pokemon Go came out a year ago, I had several co-workers start playing it so I joined in. It resulted in me going jogging for the first time in years. While out jogging, I was jogging by the temple in Seattle. I was hoping to jog around the grounds but the gates were locked for the night. There was a man near the gates who looked like he also wanted to get in and was disappointed. As I got close I noticed that his face looked a bit beaten up. Long story short, the man was homeless, trying to get off drugs, needed a place to crash and he'd spent the last of his money on a bus ticket to get to here because he'd heard that the church at this intersection helped the homeless. He saw our temple, tall and well lit, and assumed this was it. He was in tears as he told me how he'd gotten mugged earlier that day. I looked up homeless shelters on my phone and found that the Lutheran church across the street helped out with homeless shelters. The whole experience brought this passage of Moroni to mind. Here was someone, poor and needy, looking for help, seeing this holy and well adorned temple, and finding no help. This is not to say that we should change how our temples function or how they're built. This is to say that all of us as members need to rise to Moroni's challenge, or in other words, to live up to our baptismal covenants.

This brings me to the second passage, Mosiah 18:8-9, which says that the ordinance of baptism is a demonstration our willingness to..."be called [God's] people, and [our] willing[ness] to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light, and [our] willing[ness] to mourn with those that mourn; and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times."

In a way, this covenant is one in which we act with Christ in the act of atonement. What is atonement? In very real ways it is Christ bearing our burdens for us, it is Christ mourning with us and then comforting. We covenant to do this as well.

Now the part of this passage that was paradigm shifting for me was the mourning part. Growing up, it seemed to me that members who stayed happy, even in the face of trauma, death, etc. were considered to be the members that were really strong in their faith. We even at times have lessons in which we say that we just need to choose to be happy. Interestingly in Moses 7, we learn that God weeps. God, in a celestial state, experiences sadness and mourning because of the pain that we, the children of our heavenly parents, experience. Having this sink in was paradigm shifting because in my mind up to that point, the Celestial kingdom was happiness. It turns out that like Lehi taught in 2nd Nephi, there must be opposition in all things. To experience the sublime happiness of the Celestial, we also experience the sadness and pain of others as we mourn with them.

The movie Inside Out did a fantastic job of showing how important sadness is. Sadness is shown to play an important role by enabling other people to recognize sadness in those around them, mourn with them, and then all feel closer and a little better.

Doctor Who last season also had a great episode in which the Doctor explains all of the pain and trauma he's experienced and then says: "And do you know what you do with all that pain? Shall I tell you where you put it? You hold it tight, till it burns your hand, and you say this: No one else will ever have to live like this. No one else will have to feel this pain. Not on my watch!"

That is how I try to better fulfill my baptismal covenants to mourn with others. I remember the pain I've gone through, and the pain moves me to try and help others in similar circumstances. This is also very similar to what the prophet Isaiah says is the purpose of fasting. We fast to help us remember how painful hunger can be and to then use that to avoid hiding ourselves from our own flesh and blood who are going through involuntary fasting by alleviating their suffering.

Even the 3 Nephites who were transfigured and told that they would never again experience pain were told that they would suffer because of the sins of the world. This comes up in my third passage, when the 12 disciples were asked what they wanted from Jesus.

This passage had an impact on me because it was the first time that I noticed the importance of which personal pronouns Jesus uses when talking. After Jesus asked what they wanted, 9 of them wish for personal salvation and life with Christ (an unarguably good desire I might add), while 3 wish to serve and help others as long as possible. Notice the differences in Jesus' words. To the 9 Jesus says: "Blessed are ye" But to the 3 he says "more blessed are ye." To the 9 he says "ye shall come unto ME in MY kingdom," but to the 3 he says "ye shall be blessed in the kingdom of MY FATHER." To the 9 he says "ye shall find rest," but to the 3 he says "ye shall have a fulness of joy; and ye shall sit down in the kingdom of my Father; yea, your joy shall be full, even as the Father hath given me fulness of joy; and ye shall be even as I am, and I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one."

This led me to more carefully look at personal pronouns used by Jesus. When I followed the personal pronouns Jesus uses throughout the New Testament, but especially in John, something interesting emerged. Jesus refers many times in John to "my commandment" or "my commandments." One of these examples is when Jesus says the famous verse all mormon seminary students learn: "If ye love me, keep my commandments." Here Jesus is giving us the key for how it is that we love God, or in other words, how we keep the first of the 2 great commandments. In following every instance that Jesus refers to "my commandment" we learn what it is: "love one another." (John 13:34, 15:12) Other times Jesus doesn't say "my commandment" but says that he is giving us a commandment many times, (John 14:15, 14:21, 15:10) and those commandments he gave were that we love each other as he loves us. By loving each other, we love God. As Jesus said in the Gospel of John: "If ye love me, keep my commandments," and since all his commandments in that gospel (and the New Testament) were to "love one another" we can also read this as "If ye love me, love one another."

The last passage I wanted to mention was from King Benjamin's address. He says:

And behold, I tell you these things that ye may learn wisdom; that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God.

The paradigm shift I had from this verse was that the two great commandments are actually one and the same. We show our love and service to God by loving and serving others. I don't think that it is possible to overstate the importance of loving and serving others, especially those in need. In the New Testament we can learn where Jesus placed this, loving and serving others, in relation to religious ordinances, the scriptures, and prophets.

In Mark 12:32-34

And to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, IS MORE than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God. And no man after that durst ask him any question.

Remember that burnt offerings and sacrifices were the temple rituals of that time. In Matthew 22:40 when answering what was the greatest commandment, Jesus gave the 2 great commandments and said

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

So here Jesus is saying that the scriptures and prophetic comments on them hang on the commands to Love God and each other. In this context the word κρέματα, or 'hang' is the same as hanging a picture, or hanging something on a nail. If you were rock climbing would you rather have a grip on something hanging or resting on a nail, or would you prefer to grip the two nails in a sure place?

A brief recap is that in Mark and Matthew we read that Love is greater than religious ordinances and greater than scriptures and prophetic commentary respectively.

The other account in the New Testament of Jesus being asked about the 2 great commandments resulted in him giving the parable of the Good Samaritan. In it, the priest and the Levite who passed by the wounded man were by Jewish standards very holy, respectable, and high ranking people. In our day Jesus might have said a Stake President and a Temple President instead of a Priest and Levite. The scriptures forbade the priest and Levite from touching or being near anything 'unclean' which includes dead people. If they violate this rule, they must go through a long cleansing period and would be unable to perform any ordinances for others. Their interpretation of their scriptures and rules blinded them from living the greatest commandments. The Samaritan, consider by the Jews to be apostate and sinful, was the one who did show love.

Do we show love and serve those who hold apostate views in our mind? Do we reach out to those who are 'sinners' or are 'lost' rather than avoiding them because of our interpretation of the scriptures? Could we reach out to help the 'other' in our lives, be it a religious 'other', a political 'other' or a personal 'other?' Do we, like the priest or Levite, even let our pursuit of our own personal righteousness or holiness prevent us from helping and serving those whom we disagree with? Are we more concerned with our own personal salvation or with helping others achieve the same? The irony is that if we pursue our own salvation to the point of neglecting others we fail. When we seek to help and aid others, we find that we too are saved and exalted. Truly if we lose our lives in service we find it.

King Benjamin's teaching that serving our fellow humans is serving God places the imperative that we love and serve everyone as the top priority of our worship and faith. I fall short all the

time in this endeavor, we all do. My hope, prayer, faith, and desire, is that we can all be better at reaching out to others in love; that we can be "at-one" with each other and God; that we can build and be Zion. I leave this with you in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

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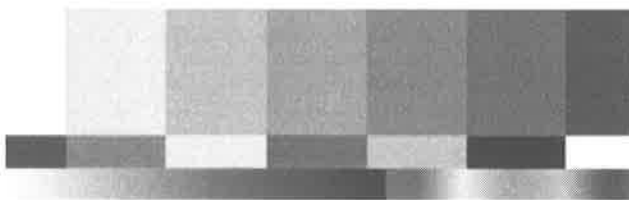
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