

NT LESSON # 14

“WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?”

Reading: Matthew 18; Luke 10

by Ted L. Gibbons

INTRODUCTION: In Leviticus 19:18, the Lord commanded, “Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.” This is a commandment given 11 times in the scriptures. In its narrowest view, it is counsel for survival, because if ‘neighbor’ means only the family next door or around the corner, we either ‘love’ them or we live in bitterness and distrust.

But the Savior’s counsel clearly has a wider application than this. In its scriptural use, the term ‘neighbor’ or ‘neighbour’ means anyone with whom we have dealings, and, more specifically, anyone who needs our help. It is in this context that we examine another of those great scriptural questions: “Who is my neighbor?”

I. JESUS TEACHES THAT WE MUST BECOME AS LITTLE CHILDREN

I had never heard of “mission politics” until I was a district leader in Santo André. But Elder Whoeveritwas became bitter because the assignment of leadership positions in the mission had never extended to him. He claimed to be certain that the reason he had been passed over was because he refused to cultivate an adoring but false relationship with the Mission President and his Assistants. He seemed to be convinced that missionary greatness had passed him by because of his unwillingness to pretend to be something that he wasn’t, or to feel something that he didn’t. I tried to explain to him that the only greatness in leadership came from service and that service was an opportunity unhindered by calling or position. He was unconvinced and remained cynical.

But years later in the New Era, I read a beautiful description of what I had been trying to say to him. The article was called “Confession of a Would-be Zone Leader” and described the feelings of a missionary near the end of his mission who was mortified not to have been called to be a Zone Leader. He had served admirably in other mission assignments. Changes were coming. He was certain that he was soon to be a Zone Leader. But he was not chosen, and he was devastated. He wrote:

It was at that moment when everything seemed blackest, when I could

no longer endure the taste of my own bitter self, that I suddenly filled with an illuminating insight that burst like a light in a dark place.

It was as if a voice had spoken to me — not the voice my own mind, but some other, greater mind. It was as if someone said to me, “What you really want is a sign that you are acceptable to Jesus Christ. A Church calling is not that sign; the true sign is the Holy Ghost. . . .

I began to understand the truth: what I wanted more than anything was to know that I was worthwhile, that I had somehow pleased my Savior, that I had somehow gained his love and trust. I had looked forward to a Church calling as a sign that I was worthwhile, a sign that I was acceptable to my mission president, to the Church, and most of all, to the Lord. But I had forgotten that a leadership position is not the sign the Lord gives to those whom he accepts; the true sign of his approbation is the Holy Ghost — the power, the fruits, and the gifts of the Spirit. (Paul James Toscana, *The New Era*, Jan-Feb, 1981, p. 37)

I believe that this concern about rank and status still exists in the church. It is a subject rarely discussed, but certainly there are many who wonder why a call (or a greater call) has never come. *Will I be a den leader forever? Why can't I work with the Laurels? Or, I've been on the High Council for years and the Stake Mission President for about as long. Now they want me to be the Scoutmaster in my ward? Or, Why did they call him to be a counselor to the Bishop. I know I am more qualified than he is.*

The question that introduces Matthew 18 suggests something of this same attitude:

1 At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? (Matthew 18:1)

The mother of James and John had some concern about status in the Kingdom of God.

Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him.

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And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on

the left, in thy kingdom. (Matthew 20:20,21)

The Savior taught a powerful lesson about the things that matter most in heaven.

2 And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,

3 And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:2-4).

I have enjoyed watching my children become less childlike, but there are negatives to the growth in personality and independence that I have observed. When the children were tiny, and I asked, “Who wants to go with me?” they all wanted to, and never mind where we were going. But as they increased in age, there were changes. After the initial years of unquestioning willingness, they began to ask things like, “Where are we going?” Then they wanted to know if food would be involved. Now, for those older ones—college students and returned missionaries, the answer is usually “No.”

My wife and I have been through this process with 12 children. Not one of them in his or her earliest years has ever asked me which one I like best. The youngest, 12-year old Bexzaida, is most likely to volunteer for any assignment—she loves to give family home evening lessons while my returned-missionary sons look for excuses to avoid the stress. When I have chastised her for her actions, she come to me for a hug. She has no ambitions, competes with no other family member, loves unconditionally, and forgives instantly. Who is greatest, then? The one most childlike, and most ready to submit instantly and unconditionally to the will of the Father. Thus we read;

And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted. (Matthew 23:12)

There is another question here, of course. What is “greatness?” Does the evaluation of greatness in the kingdom of heaven proceed according to the same criteria that we use in the social conventions of mortality? Or, in heaven, is greatness something else entirely. Matthew tells us that

he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. (Matthew 23:11)

And in Mark we read

Now Jesus sat down and called the twelve, and said unto them, If any man desire to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all. (Mark 9:32, JST)

II. THROUGH THE PARABLE OF THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT, JESUS TEACHES ABOUT FORGIVENESS

One of the divine requirements made of us in our relationships with our neighbors is that we must forgive them. “How often?” Peter wanted to know. “As many as seven times?” (Matthew 18:21) “Until seventy times seven,” the Savior replied, and he meant it. Forgiveness is not linked to merit or repentance or the gravity of the offense or the sorrow of the offender, but only to the desire of the offended one to be forgiven. The Savior taught this with a powerful parable. Here it is from Matthew 18.

23 Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.

24 And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents.

25 But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.

26 The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

27 Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

28 But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took [him] by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest.

29 And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have

patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

30 And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.

31 So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done.

32 Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me:

33 Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?

34 And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.

35 So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

Clearly, one of the great lessons taught by this parable is the colossal difference between our debt to the Savior (the king) and the debt of others to us. Several years ago I wrote something about this parable.

Note that the servant who was brought before the king during the time of accounting was in debt to the king for the sum of “ten thousand talents.” (Matthew 18:24) The talent was a measure of weight. Its value was determined by the material of which it was composed. Likewise, the “hundred pence” owed to the first servant by one of his fellows represents a money value based on weight. (See Matthew 18:28) “Pence” was the word used in the King James Version to represent the Greek word “denarii.” One talent was worth six thousand denarii.

In Matthew 20:2 we read that the pence or denarius was a day’s wages for a common laborer. At that rate, the second servant would be able to pay of his debt in a little more than three months if he dedicated all of his income to the task. But the first servant, who owed the ten thousand talents, would have needed one hundred and fifty thousand years of toil to pay off his debt to the king.

Because these measures of weight and coinage were probably silver (although gold is a possibility) we are able to compare their value, and the debt they represent, in contemporary dollars. Recently, silver was selling on the world market at about \$5.00 per ounce. At that price, one talent of 750 ounces would be worth \$3750.00 But the debt of the unmerciful servant was not one talent; it was ten thousand talents, making the total debt around \$37,500,000.00! The denarius, at one eighth of an ounce, would be worth about \$.62 and the total debt of the second servant would have been about \$62.00.

Using the gold standard, the debt of the first servant would have been somewhere around \$3,200,000,000.00; the debt of the second about \$5,300.00.

Surely the relative debts are a part of the lesson the Savior intended to teach. Talents and denarii were as familiar to his listeners as dollars and cents are to us. The significance of the difference between the two debts would not have been lost on those disciples, and it must not be lost on us. The declaration of the Lord in D&C 64:9 suddenly takes on a great deal more meaning.

Wherefore, I say unto you, that ye ought to forgive one another; for he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the GREATER SIN. (Emphasis added)

Just how much greater the Lord has taught us clearly in this parable. (Ted L. Gibbons, *Misery and Joy*, [Keepsake, 1991], pp. 76, 77)

I have had another thought about this parable, one inspired by the writings of Elder Jerry Lund. Since all things are written by the Father (see 3 Nephi 27:26), there must exist in some heavenly library a comprehensive list of all of my mistakes. I wonder how many there are after 57 years of less than perfect performance. I suppose that I am somewhere near 10,000 by now; perhaps I passed that milestone years ago. But no one—NO ONE—has ever offended me a hundred times. And those offenses that I have suffered have been the result of less than perfect people doing less than perfect things in a fallen world where everybody sins and nobody is perfect (see 1 John 1:8). But my offences against the Savior, my additions to his burden of suffering in the garden and on the cross are transgressions against

someone who is perfect, a being who suffered for me (see D&C 19:16), who drank the bitter cup for me (Isaiah 51:22), and who is willing to appear before the Father and plead for me (see D&C 45:3-5). How can I ask for forgiveness for ten thousand things and refuse to forgive one thing, or a dozen, or even a hundred?

III. THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN: A LESSON ON CHARITY

Joseph Smith suggested that an important element of interpreting parables was to discover, when possible the question that caused the parable to be taught.

What is the rule of interpretation? Just no interpretation at all. Understand it precisely as it reads. I have a key by which I understand the scriptures. I enquire, what was the question which drew out the answer, or caused Jesus to utter the parable? It is not national; it does not refer to Abraham, Israel or the Gentiles, in a national capacity, as some suppose. To ascertain its meaning, we must dig up the root and ascertain what it was that drew the saying out of Jesus. (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p.276)

In this parable the question (asked by a lawyer who wanted to “tempt” the Savior) was, “Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25)

“Lawyers” were not simply advocates, but scholars well-versed in the law—experts in the Law of Moses and the Prophets. Jesus asked the lawyer what the law and the prophets said about that question.

And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live (Luke 10:27,28).

“Well,” said the Savior, “you’ve answered the question. Live that way.”

But this man, knowing I suspect that in a literal interpretation of this requirement, he was headed somewhere other than heaven, asked a further question: “And who is my neighbor?” The answer to these two questions is the parable of the Good Samaritan.

30 And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

31 And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

32 And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.

33 But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,

34 And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

35 And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.

36 Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?

37 And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise (Luke 10:30-37).

We must strive to be like the gentle and helpful Samaritan, serving our neighbors in need, but at the same time realizing that there is some of the Priest and the Levite in most of us. A careful review of our lives will remind us that we have probably passed by “on the other side” many times when we had the capacity and resources to render much-needed assistance.

Several years ago, my second daughter married a marvelous young man. In an effort to conserve funds and personalize the experience, we elected to have the reception in our stake center and to do the decorating and cleaning ourselves. The wedding and reception were glorious, and after the festivities were over, we began the process of bringing order out of chaos in the cultural hall. I had six sons at the reception (a seventh was in the mission field). They were all there at the beginning. But one took his wife and a crying baby home, another left with his wife after half

an hour. Then three others decided to go to a late movie, and suddenly Lydia and I were left with the youngest son, the burden of hours of cleaning ours alone. We were in need of much help, but those most likely and available “passed by on the other side.”

This is a simple concept, but also at times a costly one. Serving might mean giving up a movie or a few hours of sleep of some time and money. Bishop Victor L. Brown told this story to employees of the Church Education System on 9 September 1983.

A lesson [on the Good Samaritan] was in a seminary class . . . in Korea. The sequel is told about a student who was in that class. This boy’s father was a physician and a rather affluent man. One day one of the father’s friends called and asked if he were having financial difficulty. His response was that everything was fine. “But why do you ask?”

The friend said, “I saw your son selling newspapers on the street corner in Seoul the other day.”

The father replied, “It couldn’t have been my son. He has a liberal allowance and has no need for additional money.”

The friend said, “I walked up to him and talked to him, and it was your son.”

When the boy got home from school that day, his father asked him about the incident. He indicated that he had been selling newspapers. His father asked, “Isn’t your allowance sufficient? Do you need more money?”

When the son responded that his allowance was adequate, the father asked, “Then why are you selling newspapers?”

He said, “There is a boy in our class at school who comes from a very poor family, and he must have help if he is to stay in school. Each week I have taken my allowance and bought newspapers. I, along with some of my friends, sell the newspapers and give the money to this boy so he may remain in school.”

In addition the son had asked his mother to increase the size of the lunch she packed for him each day. She didn't question him about this; I suppose she thought that as a growing teenager, he was just extra hungry. He told his father that this boy from the poor family went hungry, so he shared his lunch with him.

The father asked, "Why are you doing these things?"

He replied, "In seminary we have been studying the lesson of the Good Samaritan. I didn't just want to know what the lesson taught intellectually. I wanted to know how it felt to be a Good Samaritan."

CONCLUSION

President Thomas S. Monson, First Counselor in the First Presidency, recalls:

My own father, a printer, worked long and hard practically every day of his life. I'm certain that on the Sabbath he would have enjoyed just being at home. Rather, he visited elderly family members and brought cheer into their lives.

One was his uncle, who was crippled by arthritis so severe that he could not walk or care for himself. On a Sunday afternoon Dad would say to me, 'Come along, Tommy; let's take Uncle Elias for a short drive.' Boarding the old 1928 Oldsmobile, we would proceed to Eighth West, where, at the home of Uncle Elias, I would wait in the car while Dad went inside. Soon he would emerge from the house, carrying in his arms like a china doll his crippled uncle. I then would open the door and watch how tenderly and with such affection my father would place Uncle Elias in the front seat so he would have a fine view while I occupied the rear seat.

The drive was brief and the conversation limited, but oh, what a legacy of love! Father never read to me from the Bible about the good Samaritan. Rather, he took me with him and Uncle Elias in that old 1928 Oldsmobile along the road to Jericho ("Hallmarks of a Happy Home," Ensign, Nov. 1988, 70,71).

In Acts 10:38, we read about a man named Jesus who went about "doing good." So

many of us are satisfied with just going about. But this lesson from the gospels—the lesson of the little children and the unmerciful servant and the Samaritan—are a directive to us. We also must go about doing good. We must love our neighbors. It is in this way that we become true disciples.

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