

Selflessness Versus Selfishness

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It is nice to be here with you again. As I contemplated what I ought to say to you here and now, the thoughts that came into my mind were basically the same thoughts I talked about 22 years ago on October 27, 1981. None of you would have been here to hear that talk, so I feel justified in repeating some of the same material.

When I was a student here, I used to attend the devotionals and listen to great men and women give powerful messages. I couldn't imagine then how they could possibly do it. I still can't imagine it.

I received a call to serve as a missionary, and then after my mission I had a military obligation. I married and began to raise a family and never did get back to complete my formal education.

I believe it is possible for a person to become educated without necessarily being schooled, but I have grieved over the fact that I was not able to get more formal education. I have struggled with a compensatory effort to overcome that problem. I have not always succeeded, and so in many ways I am still unschooled. If it were not for the powers of heaven helping to educate me, it would be most difficult to carry on with my assignments. I recommend education to

you with all my heart. I congratulate you for being here.

Asking your attention and patience, I will attempt to convey some thoughts that have come to me.

If the veil that covers our remembrance of our premortal past were somehow lifted, we could see ourselves in that glorious assembly where our Eternal Father presented to us the plan for our salvation and exaltation.

How long it took I do not know—the time does not matter. What matters is that it really happened. It must have been a most interesting time. I suppose there were some anxious moments as one thing built upon another. There must have been intense emotion and anticipation while waiting for the next part to unfold. Think of the pondering and discussion. Father was about His work, teaching us how to exercise our agency by unfolding truth to our understanding.

As these truths did unfold, there must have been many questions and concerns on our part about the creation of the earth, leaving

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our Father's presence, our need for physical bodies, the veil, living by faith, symbolic ordinances, death, the Resurrection, and the conditions upon which our return to our Father was based.

We must have understood some very basic principles then. We must have been able to see that all living things are designed to reproduce after their own kind, that as children of an eternal Father—the seed of a god, if you will—it is our nature to grow and develop into eternal beings with the potential to become like He is. There must have been anxiety on our part when we learned of the need to leave our Father, come to this earth, and have a veil of forgetfulness cover our minds. How would we know what to do or how to do it? And then there would be opposition, choices to make, and the possibility of mistakes and failure.

It must have been a great comfort as our Heavenly Father made covenants with us to send one of His counselors to be a guide and companion—one of His counselors with delegated power to communicate the truths of the plan to us, that by the power of spiritual communication we could know how to make correct decisions so as to mature after the nature of the species of our Father, who is a god. We know this great counselor as the Holy Ghost.

As our Father taught us, a pattern began to unfold. It must have become obvious that there would be many things we could not do for ourselves. Someone would have to serve us.

After its creation, it would not be possible for us to control this world upon which we were to be placed. The earth's delicate environment would have to have a unique relationship to the sun, would need rain and fertile soil to sustain life, would have governing laws of gravity and electricity, and would be subject to the requirements of the elements and their reactions to each other. Someone would have to control these things for us.

A sense of calmness and peace with the Father's plan must have come to us as He made covenants to give us His other counselor. He would have power to do all these things for us that we could not do for ourselves.

We would not be able to provide for ourselves the physical bodies we would need to become like Father. Someone would need to serve us by being parents—mothers and fathers.

We would not have power during our infancy to sustain ourselves. Someone would have to serve us. The basic unit to provide this service, the family, was outlined to our understanding and put into place in our behalf.

We learned that the physical bodies we would receive would be temporary and would be subject to weakness, disease, and, finally, death. If we were to return to our Heavenly Father with bodies like His—glorified, sanctified, celestialized bodies—someone would have to do something for us, something we could not do for ourselves and something that would reunite our spirit bodies with our physical bodies after the pattern in which God our Father created us.

There were some other serious needs. It would have been clear to us that because of the influence of opposition, we would make mistakes. Because Father had taught us that these mistakes constituted sin, that sin could not be tolerated by Him, and that no sinful thing could return to His presence, we were then faced with a dilemma. There would have to be a way to overcome these mistakes. Someone would have to intercede for our sins. A need for a redeemer became very clear to us. Who would it be?

It was then that Satan came before the Father and uttered the most selfish of all statements ever spoken in the heavens: "Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor" (Moses 4:1).

It was then that the most selfless of all service in the heavens or upon the earth was offered as Christ the “Beloved Son, which was . . . Beloved and Chosen from the beginning,” came before Father and said, “Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever” (Moses 4:2).

By holy covenant between the Father and His children, Jesus Christ was sent to serve us in all things—to do all things for us that we could not do for ourselves.

The laws and the covenants were clear to us. They required that we come to this earth to work through the natural process of growth and maturing that will take us back to Father. We must work through this process to become like He is and live the type of life He lives. The work is one of serving and being served. The pattern is clear.

Happiness in this life can only be obtained by establishing the proper balance between serving and being served. We are social beings. We cannot live in happiness if we attempt to live alone. Self-imposed celibacy and isolationism is an extreme expression of selfishness and an unwillingness to serve or be served. Our eternal destiny is welded to the destiny of our fellows. The very nature of our existence is interdependence on one another.

A mother serves by giving birth to a child and continues in its service until the child grows to independence. For life to continue, the process must repeat itself. When one is serving, another is being served in turn—and simultaneously. Faith, love of God and fellowman, patriotism, and self-esteem all depend on how we practice serving and being served.

Perhaps this principle is best understood if referred to as selflessness. Selflessness is the giving of oneself in the serving of others and the giving of oneself in being served by others. Selflessness is a marvelous virtue. It embraces the true spirit of companionship. It is the very essence of friendship. It is the portrayer of true love and oneness in humanity.

Fundamental to our individuality is agency. The divinely given and heaven-protected gift of agency allows us to determine our own balance of selflessness. How and to what degree we serve others and allow them to serve us is our choice.

In infancy and childhood we are predominantly served. Our parents provide us with food, clothing, and shelter and nourish our spirits with love and companionship that gives us a sense of belonging and security. We develop kindred ties as we accept from them this service. The very act of our accepting it is, in and of itself, a returning of the gift to the giver. Parents find joy and comfort in participating in the care and training that brings about the maturity and integrity of the adolescent and then the adult. Their joy is consistent with the progress of the child. It falters only when their service is rejected, when disobedience occurs. Nevertheless, the very nature of selflessness keeps parents giving of themselves in spite of the setbacks.

A time always comes when our level of maturity dictates that we, as individuals, must seek for ourselves expanded experiences and companionships. If the ties we have made as children with our parents have had the proper balance of selflessness, we will have developed a kindred that no physical separation can ever break. There will be an unspoken understanding of oneness. Even with physical separation, each will maintain the joy and spiritual companionship that has been created. This oneness is an eternal happiness. It is the product of selflessness.

Often as young adults move away from the home environment for employment or to further their education, they suffer a tremendous emotional shock. Suddenly the balance of service and being served is drastically altered. Companionships are new and unproven. A feeling of love and unity has not yet been developed. Old relationships seem distant. We call this period of adjustment and growth homesickness.

Parent-child relationships turn into teacher-student or boss-employee relationships. Associations change from a kindred to a peer relationship. As this is happening, it is so important to understand the principles of selflessness.

To understand selflessness we must also understand its opposite: selfishness. Selfishness is closing the door of service to others and disallowing others to serve us in love while at the same time we attempt to serve ourselves or wrongly exact service from people.

There is no happiness in selfishness. It is a sin. Its product is misery and loneliness. It alienates companions and develops enmity in human relationships.

Selfishness and greed, put into the heart of Cain by Satan, caused our first parents, Adam and Eve, to mourn before the Lord for him and his brethren.

It was Cain's selfishness that caused him to bind himself up to Satan and, to get gain, murder his brother Abel. Selfishness inclined the children of Israel toward their indulgences as they drank and played and corrupted themselves around the idol of the golden calf.

Selfishness is the basic substance—the raw material, if you will—out of which is produced almost all other sins that Satan has introduced upon the earth.

Under his skillful management this insidious element manifests itself in such a myriad of ways that almost no one escapes its influence.

In its subtlety it can camouflage itself to the senses of man with such proficiency that he is often oblivious to its presence.

Its magnetic tentacles stretch out and draw to itself every indulgence that can block man on his quest for exaltation.

Greed, envy, covetousness, lust, rebellion, thievery, idleness, lying, hypocrisy, falseness, backsliding, immorality, infidelity, pride, arrogance, gluttony, and most other evils are drawn to selfishness as though it were music from the flute of the Pied Piper.

If we place sin in the sunlight, it will cast the shadow of selfishness. In its simplest form selfishness is the retaining to oneself that which one has the power to give away in benevolence. To some this sounds innocent, almost justifiable, but the truth is that it soon creates people whose "hearts are not satisfied [and] obey not the truth, but have pleasure in unrighteousness." It creates people who "will not give [their] substance to the poor, . . . whose spirits are not contrite, and whose bellies are not satisfied, and whose hands are not stayed from laying hold upon other men's goods, whose eyes are full of greediness, and who will not labor with [their] own hands!" (D&C 56:15–17).

That which a man serves himself upon the platter of selfishness and greed may appease his mortal appetite, but it will leave him spiritually starved and malnourished.

As a thought precedes an act, so does selfishness precede sin. Immorality of every kind has its basis in selfishness. Why else would someone commit an immoral act if not to satisfy his or her own pleasure?

Selfishness embraces corruption as people scheme and bribe and take unfair advantage to satisfy their wants and obsessions.

It becomes pride as men and women forsake things of eternal value—even marriage, family, and God—for supposed high position and fame.

Consider how many are infidel to one another and to God as they selfishly squander their lives and means on the evaporative pleasures of what the world portrays as fashionable.

Satan's subtle use of selfishness causes parents to justify wasting away countless hours before a television set—absorbing violence, sensuality, vulgarity, and the foolishness of the world—while their children, usually allowed to view the same things, are starving for affection and attention. Can such selfishness be condoned, or are parents bringing condemnation upon themselves and sin down upon their heads by not using this time to teach their children? Parents have

been instructed to teach their children “the doctrine of repentance, faith in Christ the Son of the living God, and of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of the hands, [and] to pray, and to walk uprightly before the Lord” (D&C 68:25, 28).

Selfishness draws men into a spiritual vacuum, where, absorbed in self-service, they shut out all others.

Selfish idleness, with its I’ll-do-it-later attitude, provides the base of procrastination that keeps righteous work from being done. Satan has decreed he will do all that is possible to stop righteous work upon the earth. What better way than to cause men to procrastinate?

Within the Church this work stoppage is manifest in a failure to faithfully comply with callings. Home teaching goes unattended. Tithes and offerings go unpaid. Members neglect keeping personal histories and family records and doing temple work. There is an unwillingness to give service in the missionary effort. How it must please Satan to see his success in influencing into nonparticipation those who could be the builders of God’s kingdom.

Of all influences that cause men to choose wrongly, selfishness is undoubtedly the strongest. Where it is, the Spirit is not—talents go unshared, the needs of the poor unrequited, the weak unstrengthened, the ignorant untaught, and the lost unrecovered.

Selfishness viewed in its true sense is the absence of empathy and compassion, the abandonment of brotherhood, the rejection of God’s plan, the isolation of one’s soul.

Just as selflessness can carry us to our exaltation and eternal lives, so can selfishness lead us to our destruction and eternal damnation. Each day we are faced with the challenge: Will our acts be selfless or selfish?

Life is competitive. There is competition for space. Imaginary lines are drawn that others are not welcome to step over. Mental walls are built, and doors are closed. We dare anyone to intrude.

There is competition for companionship. We ask, “Who will be my friends?” If they are my friends—my best friends—jealousy, a feeling that they cannot be the friends of others, may arise.

There is competition for intelligence, talent, conversation, and experiences. As we size one another up and try one another on, we are constantly faced with the challenges of selflessness versus selfishness.

The only way given in heaven and upon earth whereby a man may be sanctified is in the service of others.

Every requirement that God’s plan for our salvation places upon us is based in the giving of ourselves. Having the spirit of selflessness, men and women share themselves, their talents, and their means in benevolent service to mankind and God. Their reward is the freeing of their soul, the growth of their love, nearness to Divinity, and worthiness for the companionship of the Spirit.

Are we like the man who came running unto Jesus pleading, “What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17)? After Jesus had explained to him the commandments he must live and the man had assured him that he had done all these things from his youth, Jesus told him he lacked but one thing:

Sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me.

And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions. [Mark 10:21–22]

Or are we like the widow who cast her two mites into the treasury? Upon seeing her, Jesus said to His disciples:

This poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury:

For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living. [Mark 12:43–44]

Each of your circumstances are unique to you alone. Each of you must develop the acts of your own character.

If you would be truly happy, these acts must be acts of selflessness. Selflessness will turn sadness into a cheerful countenance. Selflessness produces kindness and dispels hypocrisy. Selflessness develops love, confi-

dence, and trust. It is the vehicle of generosity. It is the resource God uses to answer the prayers of His children.

With selflessness we demonstrate our true relationship and intimacy with the Savior. It is the link that binds together the family of God.

May you be selfless and exalted, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.