

Personal Accountability

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It's a special privilege, brothers and sisters, to be with you on this Sabbath evening. I'm grateful for the invitation to return to this campus and to share some thoughts with you this evening. It is always an awesome responsibility to confront a congregation of this magnitude in this facility. There is something intimidating about being behind this podium.

Three Facets of the Plan of Salvation

Tonight I would like to speak to you about a condition that is essential to the plan of salvation. I refer to the condition of personal accountability. There are three principal facets of the plan of salvation that have a direct bearing upon personal accountability. One of them has to do with the provisions made for us by the Godhead over which we do not have control or which we cannot initiate ourselves. I refer to such provisions as the infinite atonement of Christ with all of its effects; the spiritual gifts, including the ministrations of the Holy Spirit; the saving ordinances and the priesthood authority necessary to perform them; the earth itself, and the organization of the Church; and the laws and principles embodied in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Another facet of the plan of salvation directly related to personal accountability has to do with the personal attributes, or inherent qualities,

that each of us possesses as a child of God. These would include our intelligence, our will or agency—our capacity to make choices and our capacity to respond to spiritual forces that emanate from God, which some have identified with our conscience.

A third related facet of the plan of salvation is environmental in nature. It is concerned with the circumstances we encounter here in earth life where laws of cause and effect are free to operate and where many alternatives are available to us. It is an environment ideally suited for testing and proving.

Accountability Defined

Personal accountability is affected by all of these aspects of the plan for the eternal progress of the children of God. It is very important for us to understand that, without the condition of personal accountability, the plan of salvation could not operate successfully.

Perhaps it would be helpful to attempt a definition of *accountability*. I do not believe

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that the standard dictionary definition encompasses all that the Lord ascribes to this condition or quality in human beings. There is a difference between accountability and responsibility. Responsibility relates to a set of duties or expectations that may be placed upon us by others or by ourselves. Responsibility places one in a position to be accountable.

Accountability has to do with one's exercising his own will in making decisions and following a course of conduct. It implies self-initiative and a measure of self-reliance. But it requires more than the ability to act for oneself. It must be guided by a knowledge of true principles. Accountability is heightened by the confirmation of the Holy Spirit as to what is right and wrong. In fact, to act in matters of great importance without this confirmation is to act unaccountably.

The condition of personal accountability is essential to the operation of eternal justice and judgment.

Accountability and Covenants

The Lord has said that one should enter into the covenants associated with the saving ordinances only when he has begun to be accountable (see D&C 29:46–47). In fact, we are advised that if, for some reason, and individual is limited or handicapped in such a way that he cannot function as an accountable person, and if he cannot be held accountable for willful choices affecting his behavior, then he should not enter into the covenants that require such accountability. He will not be judged on the same basis as an accountable person until such time as it is possible for him to function without the limitations (see D&C 134:12).

To the degree to which one becomes more fully accountable, he becomes more like God. Note the expression made with regard to Adam and Eve when they had partaken of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. "And I, the Lord God, said unto mine Only

Begotten: Behold, the man is become as one of us to know good and evil" (Moses 4:28). Such knowledge is essential to accountability, and with this knowledge men become "free . . . to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given" (2 Nephi 2:26).

The condition of accountability, therefore, is not to be avoided if one is to progress. It is, indeed, essential to progress in the Lord's plan of salvation.

It could be said that to the degree to which we attempt to avoid or escape from accountability ourselves, or to act in such a way that we inhibit the accountability of others, we interfere with the Lord's plan of progress.

As knowledge and experience increase and as spiritual enlightenment is enhanced, the level of accountability is raised. The degree to which an individual is expected to assert himself in the pursuit of good works is broadened.

I would like to share with you some suggestions regarding how we might act in a more accountable way and thereby increase our opportunities for eternal progress.

I. Make Your Own Difficult Decisions.

All of us are at times faced with decisions that have a profound effect on the course of our lives or upon the lives of those with whom we have the greatest influence. When we face such decisions, we may feel a reluctance to commit ourselves to a course of action. Sometimes there is the temptation to transfer the decision to someone else and thereby escape the accountability ourselves.

When I was serving as a young bishop with only limited experience in Church leadership and lacking much in the way of practical experience as well, I was approached by an elderly couple in my ward. They were old enough to be my grandparents. For years they had successfully farmed a piece of ground.

They had been blessed in many ways and had reared a fine family. None of the children had showed an inclination to follow in their father's footsteps as a farmer. Increasing age and declining health had brought the couple to a point of decision as to what should be done with their farm. They were reluctant to have it pass from their hands after so many years of labor and careful improvement. The children could not agree on a plan of action. Some wished to keep the farm in the family and lease it for an income to be shared among the family members; others didn't care what decision was made.

One Sunday afternoon the couple appeared at my office in the ward chapel and asked to consult with me. They explained their dilemma and their reluctance to make a decision that might divide the family and jeopardize their own welfare for the remaining years of their lives. "We have come to you, bishop," the old gentleman said, "to ask you to find out for us what the Lord wants us to do."

I was humbled by the sincere trust that the couple were willing to place with me, but I sensed that the decision they were attempting to lay upon me and upon the Lord was not ours to make. I counseled them in the best way I could, tried to help them weight the alternatives, and then recommended that they prayerfully reach a decision themselves and ask their family to sustain them. They left my office in great disappointment, making it quite clear to me that they felt I was not fulfilling my responsibility as a bishop.

Whenever we try to avoid the accountability for decisions such as this in our own lives, I believe we fail to understand one of the purposes for which we came into mortal life. It is altogether proper and wise to seek the best possible counsel before making crucial decisions. It is sometimes necessary to seek inspiration through prayer and fasting. But I am convinced that the Lord does not want us to abdicate the accountability for the final choices

we make. And I believe he honors those choices when we make them in the proper way. If we refuse to accept such accountability, we jeopardize our possibilities for progress and thwart the purpose for which we were allowed to come to the earth.

II. Don't Rob Others of the Opportunity to Be Accountable.

In our relationships with others, we must be careful not to prevent them from acting accountably. This is especially significant when we are given positions of leadership or responsibility which place others under our charge. The Lord's concern about this sensitive area in human relations called forth the excellent counsel that we find in section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The Lord warns us against exercising unrighteous dominion. He cautions against compulsion and controls. The proper way to influence the behavior of others, he says, is

by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile. [D&C 121:41-42]

The Lord acknowledges the need to occasionally reprove with sharpness when inspired to do so, but counsels that even this reproof should be delivered in a spirit of love.

Manipulation, programming, and regimentation are destructive to personal accountability. It does not matter how benevolent the motive of a parent or leader who compels his children or his subordinates to follow his precise prescriptions. The motive does not prevent unfortunate results from occurring and the development of a conditioned dependency.

Significant to this observation is the acknowledgement that we grow into accountability. As infants we come into mortal life in a state of innocence (see D&C 93:38). Parents

are made responsible for teaching their children about the purpose of life. They are to teach their children to pray and to walk uprightly before the Lord. They are to be models of righteousness (see D&C 68:25). All of this is to be done in order that the children can be brought to a state of accountability where they can become liable to the operation of eternal law and justice in consequence of their own willful conduct.

There is a difference between *willing* obedience and *willful* obedience. One may willingly submit himself to the requirements, controls, regulations, and domination of another in the performance of good deeds, but until he does it of his own free will (D&C 58:27), the essential intrinsic development of personal qualities and values does not occur. The performance is sterile of any lasting benefit to the doer of the deed. The Lord has warned us against doing only those things that we are commanded to do (see D&C 58:29). In so doing we become puppets, acting by the will of another.

It was for this reason that President John Taylor once made the following declaration subsequent to an experience in which someone had attempted to compel him unrighteously:

*I was not born a slave! I cannot, will not be a slave. I would not be slave to God! I'd be His servant, friend, His son. I'd go at His behest; but would not be His slave. I'd rather be extinct than be a slave. His friend I feel I am, and He is mine:— a slave! The manacles would pierce my very bones—the clanking chains would grate upon my soul—a poor, lost, servile, crawling wretch to lick the dust and fawn and smile upon the thing who gave the lash! . . . But stop! I'm God's free man: I will not, cannot be a slave! Living, I'll be free here, or free in life above—free with the Gods, for they are free. [B. H. Roberts, *The Life of John Taylor*, Bookcraft, 1963, p. 424]*

I remember well an incident that occurred years ago involving my son Michael. Mike is the father of three children himself now; and I must add that he is a better father in many ways than I was. I suspect he would not remember this incident—even so, I think he would not mind my sharing it with you.

He must have been seven or eight years old at the time. We lived in Orem in a house that was located at the end of a dead-end street that extended for half a block off one of the well-traveled thoroughfares. Around the corner from our house and about two blocks up the through street was a small corner grocery store. It was usually open seven days a week.

Mike and I had some conversations about the responsibility for using money wisely. I had felt that my counsel with him on this matter had been well received and to good effect. We had also had a number of discussions with our little family about the importance of the Sabbath day.

Then one Sunday afternoon when we had returned to home following church services, Mike and several of his friends paraded into our living room where I was reading. The lady who lived down the street from us had just rewarded the boys with a twenty-five-cent piece for each of them for some yard work they had helped her with the day before. They proudly showed me their quarters and announced that they were going to walk down to the corner grocery store and buy some candy.

I caught myself just in time to stifle the inclination to say abruptly, “No, not on Sunday!” Instead, I reminded Mike about our talks concerning the use of money and called his attention to our family’s policy about not going to the stores on Sunday. Mike was obviously troubled and a little chagrined at my response in the presence of his friends. I could tell that he was caught in a situation that was a bit difficult for him. It was a good opportunity, I felt, to let him make his own decision. “Well,

Mike," I said, "you know what we have talked about concerning the use of money, and you know how Mother and I feel about keeping the Sabbath, so you decide for yourself what you ought to do."

The boys left our home and went out to the lawn in front of the house. I stood by a window where I would not be observed and watched. For a time the boys sat on the grass in a discussion that I could not overhear. I concluded that they were not going to the store, and I was complimenting myself on the wisdom that I had used in handling the situation.

Suddenly all the boys got to their feet and started down the street. They rounded the corner and were obviously headed for the store. I was not only disappointed; I was incensed. I determined not to let Mike go through with his obvious decision, and more than that, I was going to let him know in no uncertain terms how I felt about it.

I searched for the keys to our automobile, fearful that the boys would reach the store before I could intercept them. I backed out of our driveway and drove quickly to the intersection with the through street. As I was turning the corner toward the store, I saw the boys. They were within a hundred yards of their destination. They had stopped and were apparently having another discussion. I stopped and eased back into our street far enough that I would not be obvious to them. In a moment I could tell that a decision had been made, and Mike was walking alone toward our house while the other boys went on to the store.

I backed my car to our driveway and pulled under the carport to wait for Mike. In a moment he came through the adjoining lot where there was a prune orchard. He was taking a shortcut. He kicked at the clods of dirt as he came to our fence, and, without any comment to me as he saw me in the car, he entered the house and was soon engaged in an activity with his sisters.

I realized that, in my urgency to have my will obeyed, I had almost cheated Mike of the opportunity of making an important decision for himself. I learned an important lesson that day about allowing people to be accountable.

III. Demonstrate Accountability by Doing Many Good Things of Your Own Free Will.

A truly accountable person will not require direction in every act of Christian service. Neither will he require acknowledgement or reward for all the good he does. In his desire to emulate the Savior, he will "do many [good] things of [his] own free will" (D&C 58:27).

I once drove a considerable distance to attend a testimonial for a friend who was leaving his home for a new position in another section of the country. The winter weather was threatening and roads were hazardous. It would have been easy to excuse myself from the obligation. I had been given no part to play in the proceedings, and it was unlikely that I would be recognized in the throng that would undoubtedly gather. But this man had reached out his hand to me at a critical time and had touched my life; and my life had changed. I was compelled to go and join the others in paying him this honor.

The community in which the man had lived was a small one. He had never drawn about him much of the world's goods. The little business he had operated could have been profitable enough, but he was too interested in people to be much concerned with the profit motive. He was always available but never demanding. There was nothing ostentatious about his charity. Most of us had learned to take him very much for granted, and it is unlikely that he ever would have been given any public honor until his burial day, had not his unexpected leaving brought us to remember how important his influence and friendship had been to us. The gathering on this night was the spontaneous expression of our love and sense of loss.

This same spontaneity characterized the testimonial meeting. As we entered the hall in which the gathering was to be held, we were asked to sign our names on slips of paper which were then folded and placed in a cardboard box. When the large crowd was seated and the honored guest had taken his place on the stand, after a song and a prayer, the chairman arose to announce the proceedings. He pointed to the cardboard box which was now on the rostrum. Names would be drawn from the box, he explained, and those who were chosen in this manner would be asked to represent everyone present in expressions of love and gratitude for our departing friend.

One by one the names were drawn. As the hour passed, a procession of unrehearsed speakers filed to the podium and there unfolded the legacy of selfless service that this man had given. In absorbing the drama of the occasion, each one of us must have become sensitive to the goodness which had reflected from him and had become mirrored in one way or another in our own lives.

As the meeting drew to a close, the name of a local physician was extracted from the box. For many years the good doctor had lived as a neighbor to our honored friend. He had recently returned to his home following treatment in another state for what had proved to be a near fatal illness. He earnestly addressed himself to the gathering. For many years, he explained, he had contemplated the parallels in his own life and that of his neighbor. From his point of view, each of them had been preeminently involved in service to others. He told of leaving his home to make professional calls at hours both early and late and of frequently encountering our friend departing on what seemed to be similar errands of compassion. It was at these times, the doctor said, that he felt particularly drawn to his neighbor in a fellowship of service.

At this point the speaker paused involuntarily, and his voice became touched with emotion.

Making reference to his recent illness, he related how he had left this same community several months before, not knowing whether he would ever return. No farewell testimonial had been held in his honor. He confessed that he had been a little disturbed by the obvious inequity in the attentions shown to him and to his neighbor, particularly in light of the service that both had given to the people of the community. Tonight, however, it had occurred to him why this was so.

With all of the apparent parallels between his life and that of his friend, there was one profound difference that set them apart in the eyes of their fellows. For all of his services, the doctor pointed out, he had collected a fee. That was the difference. He had not realized until now how much his fees had cost him.

Those of us who knew the good doctor and had been the recipients of his kindly ministrations realized that his self-deprecation was unjustified. But he succeeded in these dramatic circumstances in imparting a lesson that most of us will not soon forget.

IV. Be Willing to Accept Difficulties without Blaming God.

One of the provisions made for us by our Heavenly Father in his plan for our eternal progress was the nature of the environment into which we come in mortal life. As I mentioned earlier, life on earth is ideally suited to test us and prove us. Laws of cause and effect operate freely. There is opposition in all things. Conditions are designed to bring about the maturation and development essential to the progress of man in this mortal phase of his existence. Earth life is filled with risks. It provides no guarantee for safe passage. It expands our prospects for developing personal accountability.

No one passes through mortality without occasionally experiencing disappointment, heartache, and perhaps even tragedy. Once in a while, for reasons known only to him, the Lord responds to our pleading and our

prayers of faith and miraculously rescues us from these trials. Generally, however, he expects us to cope with them. He trusts that our faith in him, our understanding of life's true purpose, and the infinite promises associated with his atonement for us will sustain us and enable us to endure. We act accountably when we accept these conditions and manifest our willingness to comply with the Lord's plan.

Too frequently we hear accusations against God for bringing difficulties or calamities upon us. Or we torture ourselves with the thought that God is punishing us because of our imperfections.

Such thoughts must have crossed the mind of Joseph Smith as he sat for months in a dark prison cell in Liberty, Missouri, while his family and friends in the Church were being driven and abused. It is well for us to remember the Lord's response to the Prophet's appeal for relief and for an understanding of the purpose in all of the difficulty. "Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good" (D&C 122:7).

When burdens are lifted or when apparently inevitable consequences of illness or accident miraculously pass us by, we have cause for the deepest gratitude and thanksgiving. But when we are expected to endure, it should not be with an accusing spirit. The apostle Paul once wrote to the Saints in Rome, "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

And the Lord said to the Prophet Joseph:

My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment;

And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes. [D&C 121:7–8]

There is a most meaningful account given in the Book of Mormon of Nephi, the son of Helaman. Nephi lived in a time of great

wickedness. His efforts to draw the people back to the Lord had been largely futile. Nephi fell into a state of despondency. The record tells us:

And it came to pass as he was thus pondering—being much cast down because of the wickedness of the people . . . a voice came unto him saying,

Blessed art thou, Nephi, for those things which thou hast done; for I have beheld how thou hast with unweariness declared the word, which I have given unto thee, unto this people. And thou hast not feared them, and hast not sought thine own life, but hast sought my will, and to keep my commandments.

And now, because thou hast done this with such unweariness, behold, I will bless thee forever; and I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works; yea, even that all things shall be done unto thee according to thy word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will. [Helaman 10:3–5]

Nephi had demonstrated that he could be entrusted with the powers of God. He had proved himself fully accountable to do the right things for the right reason. The Lord's pronouncement to him is impressive: "Behold, thou art Nephi, and I am God. Behold, I declare it unto thee in the presence of mine angels, that ye shall have power over this people" (Helaman 10:6).

The same promise is given to all who will prove themselves accountable as Nephi had done. In our own day the Lord has said: "Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them" (D&C 132:20).

May we live in such a way that we will one day be personally accountable before God in doing all that he expects of us—not because we are compelled to do so, but because it has become our own will as well as his. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.