

The Peaceable Things of the Kingdom

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In a revelation to Joseph Smith, the Lord gave this simple description of the plan of life and salvation:

And this is my gospel—repentance and baptism by water and then cometh the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost, . . . which showeth all things, and teacheth the peaceable things of the kingdom. [D&C 39:6]

It is apparent from this statement that those who follow the principles of the gospel should be able to experience the “peaceable things.” Yet in this stressful period in which we live, we frequently encounter people who seem to be doing the best they know how to avoid the evils of the world, who desire very much to be good, but who suffer from unhappiness, frustration, and confusion. It is one of the paradoxes of our time.

Tonight I would like to share with you some thoughts and suggestions about how we might better enjoy the “peaceable things of the kingdom” and free ourselves from the despondency and hopelessness that sometimes seem to beset so many.

All of us feel the urgency to perfect ourselves—to learn, to grow, to achieve, to produce. Some of these pressures can be

constructive and helpful if they are not allowed to become overwhelming, especially if they are generated by our own initiative.

Learn Patience

One of the first important lessons of survival in this stressful time is to learn patience. Perfection is not achieved in one spasmodic burst of effort. As we move along the path of progress, we must find moments of enjoyment and refreshment along the way.

Orin L. Crain had this need in mind when he penned the following lines:

*Slow me down, Lord!
Ease the pounding of my heart
By the quieting of my mind.
Steady my hurried pace
With a vision of eternal reach of time.
Give me,
Amidst the confusion of my day,
The calmness of the everlasting hills.*

Dean L. Larsen was a member of the Presidency of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 3 February 1985.

*Break the tensions of my nerves
With the soothing music of the singing streams
That live in my memory.
Help me to know
The magical restoring power of sleep.
Teach me the art
Of taking minute vacations of slowing down
to look at a flower;
to chat with an old friend or make a new one;
to pet a stray dog;
to watch a spider build a web;
to smile at a child;
or to read a few lines from a good book.
Remind me each day
That the race is not always to the swift;
That there is more to life than increasing its speed.
Let me look upward
Into the branches of the towering oak
And know that it grew great and strong
Because it grew slowly and well.
Slow me down, Lord,
And inspire me to send my roots deep
Into the soil of life's enduring values
That I may grow toward the stars
Of my greater destiny.
[Reprinted in the *Ogden Standard Examiner* by
Abigail Van Buren]*

Such interludes as Mr. Crain recommends help us to recognize the “peaceable things” and to rejuvenate our energies and commitment for a renewed effort.

On one occasion Joseph Smith made the following declaration:

When you climb up a ladder you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave. [Teachings, p. 348]

Jacob's citation of the Zenos allegory in the Book of Mormon makes much the same expression:

*Ye, shall clear away the branches which bring forth bitter fruit, according to the strength of the good and the size thereof. . . .
. . . wherefore ye shall clear away the bad according as the good shall grow, . . . until the good shall overcome the bad. [Jacob 5:65–66]*

Some of us create such a complexity of expectations for ourselves that it is difficult to cope with the magnitude of them. Sometimes we establish so many particulars by which to evaluate and rate ourselves that it becomes difficult to feel successful and worthy to any degree at any time. We can drive ourselves unmercifully toward perfection on such a broad plane. When this compulsion is intensified by sources outside ourselves, the problem is compounded. Confronting these demands can bring mental and emotional despair.

Everyone needs to feel successful and worthy in some ways at least part of the time. The recognition of our frailties need not propel us to try to achieve perfection in one dramatic commitment of effort. The best progress sometimes comes when we are not under intense duress. Overzealousness is at least as much to be feared as apathy. Trying to measure up to too many particular expectations without some sense of self-tolerance can cause spiritual and emotional “burn-out.”

In order to avoid the effects of too many external and internal pressures, it is not necessary nor wise to withdraw from all of life's challenges. This would only compound our difficulties. To enjoy the “peaceable things of the kingdom,” we must find warm acceptance, love, and understanding from those who have the most direct influence on our lives.

It is helpful to remember the Savior's parable of “counting the cost” (Luke 14:28)

before we launch into any enterprise. When we simultaneously branch out into too many channels, we may not have the strength or the resources to sustain the effort and frustration will result.

Having patience requires that we maintain a proper balance in our lives. Bryant S. Hinckley had this in mind when he said,

If we are over enthusiastic, our enthusiasm may become fanaticism. If we are strongly emotional, our emotion may lead to hysterics. If we are excessively imaginative . . . we may become visionary and flighty. . . . If we have a superabundance of courage, it may manifest itself in recklessness. . . . If we are super-sympathetic, our sympathy can become a weakness and run into sentimentalism. If we are original, our originality may become an eccentricity. Piety may become sanctimoniousness. And so every virtue may become a vice—every grace a defect. It is the fine balance of these virtues that makes the strong man. [Bryant S. Hinckley, *A Study of the Character and Teachings of Jesus of Nazareth: A Course of Study for the Adult Members of the Aaronic Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1950), pp. 169–70]

Accept Yourself

Before concluding my comments on the importance of learning patience, it is important to say something about the need for developing an appropriate degree of self-tolerance. While we cannot allow ourselves to become slothful and lackadaisical in our efforts toward self-improvement, we cannot afford to lose all sense of patience and charity toward ourselves when we occasionally come short of perfection.

We are more than mechanical units. Our personalities are a process of becoming, they are growing—an inner flowering. This development does not occur in one day. We are like all others in some respects, but in some respects each of us is unique. There has never been anyone exactly like you. There never will

be. Never will anyone possess your special individuality and your particular possibilities.

In light of these facts, one of the least profitable things we can do is to compare ourselves with others. Generally, when we make such comparisons, we match our weaknesses against the most prominent talents and virtues of those we admire or envy. No one comes out well in this useless game. Its effects can be devastating.

It is necessary to accept ourselves with a self-love that is neither vain nor selfish, but rather one that is tolerant and understanding, one that we might feel toward an old friend. Your friend may have his flaws. He has limitations, but over the years you have come to recognize his good qualities. Sometimes you simply put up with him when he is overbearing and foolish. But he is your friend.

Part of enduring to the end is related to our attitudes toward ourselves. When we have a high enough regard for ourselves, we can overcome setbacks and still go forward. It is difficult to defeat a person who is determined to endure in this sense.

Develop an Attitude of Trust

I believe another quality we must have in order to enjoy the peaceable things of the kingdom is a trust in the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Sometimes much desired blessings for which we have worked hard to qualify seem to be long in coming. At other times the unfairness and arrogance of others appear to go unpunished. There are times when we cannot seem to see our way through a maze of difficulties and hard times to a satisfactory conclusion. These are some of the most severe tests of our mortal existence.

True religious faith helps us to establish such a trust. Experience ultimately teaches us that honest effort will finally be rewarded, and that wickedness, in the end, will not produce happiness. When we cannot see the end from the beginning as the Lord does, it is sometimes

a challenge to trust in his promise. But experience will confirm the validity of the trust.

Lorenzo Snow, who knew something of challenge and disappointment in his own lifetime, once made this observation to the Saints who were weighed down by the severity of their circumstances:

How ill-qualified we were one year ago to pass through the scenes through which we have been led with success. From which let us realize the folly of an over-anxiety to pry into the scenes that are lying before us, inasmuch as God will prepare a way by a gradual process, step by step, and leading us forward in a manner that will prove easy as we pass along, but which, if presented to our view at once, would seem insurmountable.

There is the story of two neighboring farmers—one a habitual Sabbath breaker, and the other a faithful observer of the Lord’s day. On one occasion the Sabbath observer severely chastised his neighbor for working his farm on Sundays rather than attending to his religious devotions. This led to an argument and a challenge. “Let us put the matter to a test,” the Sabbath breaker said. “We will select two pieces of ground of equal size and fertility. On them we will plant the same crop. My piece of ground I will work only on Sundays, and you will work yours on the other days of the week. Then we will see who gets the greater harvest.”

The challenge was accepted and the conditions were faithfully observed. As the harvest was gathered in, the Sabbath-observing farmer was disappointed to learn that the piece of ground farmed by his neighbor had produced the greater yield. The Sabbath breaker exulted in his apparent triumph and his discrediting of the contention of his faithful neighbor.

“You have forgotten one important thing,” protested the Sabbath observer. “The Lord doesn’t always settle his accounts in October.”

Related to this same matter of trust is the principle taught in the Savior’s parable of the

talents. You will recall that in this story an honorable effort, given to the full by the two honest servants, brought the same reward from the master, even though the product of their efforts was not the same.

It has seemed to me that built into the conscience of every human soul is the most accurate determiner of whether we are living in such a way to merit the ultimate blessings promised to the faithful. We point to this determiner when we say, “Be honest with yourself.” A person does not easily deceive his own conscience. Deep within our own hearts we generally know when we have paid the price, when we have done the best our personal resources and abilities would have allowed us to do at the moment, regardless of the outcome of our effort or the way it may be viewed by others. It is at these times that we know real peace, even though the product of our effort may not be all that we would have hoped it to be. The full return on this kind of investment cannot always be determined at the next audit period.

When Jesus was crucified by his detractors, it appeared to all observers—even to his disciples—that his efforts had accounted for nothing. But the Savior knew he had paid the price. History has borne record to the quality of his investment.

Another factor that has a bearing upon whether or not we experience peace in our lives has to do with our being able to realistically respond to expectations that others have for us and the demands they sometimes make of us. In responding to these expectations, we must successfully evaluate between fundamentally important values and the sometimes superficial or outward performances that others may expect from us. This requires that we recognize real truth and demonstrate integrity to it. Peace of mind comes when we know we are doing the right things for the right reasons.

For some reason, one of the most common methods many of us use to motivate is to develop feelings of guilt within ourselves or in

others for whom we have a responsibility. Guilt feelings are a natural product of an injured conscience. When we willfully violate a valid code of conduct, we suffer the consequences of our infraction in the internal conflict that occurs within our own souls. Such feelings, painful and remorseful though they may be, can generate the desire to repent and improve. They can be useful, constructive emotions that propel us forward to greater perfection. But purposefully generating feelings of guilt over some shortcoming as a means of motivating action or promoting more compliant behavior is rarely productive. The devastating effect of a child's constantly being told that he is stupid, lazy, or ugly has been well documented in behavioral studies. When anyone's honest effort to *do* better or to *be* better is met by debilitating criticism, real motivation and incentive are often destroyed. All of us profit from encouragement and from occasional constructive correction. But we must be helped to feel that we are valued and appreciated in spite of our shortcomings.

I have been appalled when I have heard leaders attempt to extort greater devotion and exertion from young missionaries by telling them they will never rise above the level of their performance on their missions. This is foolishness. I have lived long enough to see many contradictions to this contention. It is as though our performance in any given period of our lives rivets us forever to an inescapable course. If this were a true principle, repentance and reformation would be impossible.

Give of Yourself to Lift Others

My final suggestion for experiencing peaceable things probably has the best possibility for producing immediate results. It is a simple formula that will almost always work. Raise your own spirits by finding something to do that will lift others. Nothing seems to have a greater power for turning us away from our own self-pity and despondency than to focus upon

something good we can do for someone else who has a need.

Erich Fromm has said:

The most important sphere of giving . . . is not that of material things, but lies in the specifically human realm. What does one person give to another? He gives of himself, of the most precious he has, he gives of his life. This does not necessarily mean that he sacrifices his life for the other—but that he gives him of that which is alive in him; he gives him of his joy, of his interest, of his understanding, of his knowledge, of his humor, of his sadness—of all expressions and manifestations of that which is alive in him . . . He does not give in order to receive; giving is in itself exquisite joy. But in giving he cannot help bringing something to life in the other person, and this which is brought to life reflects back to him; in truly giving, he cannot help receiving that which is given back to him. [The Art of Loving (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1970), p. 20–21]

And Leona Fetzer Wintch adds this:

A famous man recently summed up his life's work by saying he had given so much away, he had only a little of himself left to die. He forgot that the book-keeping of life's ledger shows that the more a man gives of his love and of himself, the more he has. There are no limits to which the soul can extend itself, and this boundless dominion is immeasurably increased by the very act of sharing. [Life is Fissionable]

I am continually impressed by some instruction the Savior gave to his disciples near the close of his mortal ministry. It has the nature of being “bottomline” to all of his gospel teaching. You will be very familiar with this scripture, but consider it again—carefully—as I read it to you, especially within the context of my remarks to you tonight.

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

When saw we thee a stranger and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

[Matthew 25:31–46]

I think there is nothing we can do to develop godlike qualities that is more important than giving of ourselves in the way described here by the Savior. It seems to make the ultimate difference with him when it comes to the time of judgment. And I believe it has some of the highest prospects for helping us overcome any unhappiness we may be experiencing ourselves.

It would not be appropriate if I did not mention personal prayer and regular study of the scriptures as having a great influence in lifting us from feelings of frustration or despondency. As we pass through the challenges, the setbacks, and the occasional disappointments that all of us experience, may we gain reassurance from the recognition that achieving perfection is a long-term endeavor and that we can trust in the fact that right will prevail. And may we have the charity toward ourselves and others that will allow us to enjoy regularly the “peaceable things” of the kingdom, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.