

Service: The Essence of True Religion

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The responsibility to care for the poor and needy lies at the very heart of the Christian gospel. The scriptures tell us that “pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27). In addition to refraining from evil, true disciples of the Master wear out their lives in the service of others. It was Jesus Himself who said, “And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant” (Matthew 20:27). As always, Jesus, the Chosen Servant, showed us the way, capping His mortal ministry with the supernal sacrifice of His sinless life: “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

The ultimate measure of our discipleship is not to be found in professions of piety or in the number of Church positions we have held but rather in the extent to which we keep Christ’s commandments. “He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them,” Jesus said, “he it is that loveth me” (John 14:21). We cannot fully keep His commandments unless we serve others. Without that pure love of Christ which expresses itself in the care of the less fortunate, whatever else we do, or profess to be, is but “as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1). “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?” asked Moroni (Mormon 8:39).

The essence of service is found in words written on a commemorative tablet located in the southeast corner of the chancel in the cathedral at Peterborough, in Cambridgeshire, England. It is placed near the grave of a remarkable woman named Mary Deacon, who died in 1730 at age 73. Written with that peculiar genius for the language which marks the best of English usage, the felicitous phrase that commemorates her life reads as follows: “To the poor of this city gave she her daily bounty, so private as not to be told, so large as scarce to be equaled.”

Those two concepts of *privacy* and *generosity* describe what should be the nature and extent of our service to others. Before discussing them, I mention in passing the importance not only of *how* we serve but also of *why* we serve. Though people serve for various reasons, some more noble than others, the highest form of

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service is that which flows from the pure love of Christ. Such service is given without thought of gain or reward in this world or the next, but simply because the giver loves God and His children. In that consecrated service is found the best of life, the surest road to heaven. Service to others, given in love, solves the divine paradox of Christ’s gospel, that one must lose his or her life to find it (see Matthew 16:25). We lighten our own burdens by taking on those of another. In the process of losing our life in service to others, we find who we are and who Christ is. This is the promise of Jesus and the miracle of service.

I do not want to suggest in any way that service to others is the only virtue we are to cultivate as disciples of the Master. Far from it. But service to others is essential if we are to realize and retain the fullness of Christ’s Atonement in our lives. Consider these words of King Benjamin:

For the sake of retaining a remission of your sins from day to day, that ye may walk guiltless before God—I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants. [Mosiah 4:26]

Now let us return to those two essential components of true charity: privacy and generosity. Jesus rebuked those whose charity was given ostentatiously, for the aggrandizement of the giver. He was saddened by those whose motives in giving were clouded by a worldly, selfish desire to receive public acclaim for their actions. He said:

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.

Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. [Matthew 6:1–2]

We can and should be grateful for all who serve others, whatever the honorable motivation of the giver may be, but there is a quiet and gentle joy that comes to those who give anonymously, privately, without thought of or interest in public acclaim—or even of public knowledge of their benevolence. These are they who have conquered the selfishness of the natural man. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell has wisely noted, “There is a marked difference between the introspection that focuses on ‘How did I do?’ and the introspection that asks, ‘Did I do enough?’” (*All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1979], 63).

Though it happened more than four decades ago, my wife and I have never forgotten an occasion when we were blessed by an anonymous donor. It was Christmas of 1953, and I was a graduate student at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. In many ways it was the best of times. We had two small and much adored children and were deeply in love with each other, as we are to this day. Furthermore, I loved my studies and research at a world-renowned university. But we were very poor, with not a penny of financial reserves, and barely able to scrape by on my graduate stipend of two hundred dollars per month. Somehow my dear wife had managed to find a few dollars for modest Christmas presents for our two children, but that was as far as the money went. We weren’t particularly troubled by the lack of funds, but, like the couple in O. Henry’s classic tale “The Gift of the Magi,” each of us had hoped to give the other some expression of our mutual affection.

On Christmas Eve our doorbell rang. When I answered it, I found on the front porch a package in Christmas wrappings. It was addressed to us but had no indication of who had sent it. When we opened the package on Christmas morning, we found a shirt for me and a blouse for my wife. Never were gifts more appreciated, not just for themselves, but most of all because

someone cared about us. We still don't know the identity of the giver but bless his or her name to this day.

The second component of service that I wish to discuss with you today is that of generosity. As always, Jesus said it best:

Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again. [Luke 6:38]

Jesus commands us to be generous even with those who oppose us:

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven. [Matthew 5:44–45]

That commandment, to love those who hate us, is one of the most demanding requirements of Christian discipleship. It flies in the face of the “natural man,” who demands blood, revenge, retribution; whose memory of wrongs real or imagined never dims; who sees compassion as weakness and holds forgiveness in contempt. But hard though it is, Jesus still requires such generosity of spirit as part of our service to Him. The Prophet Joseph Smith had a full measure of that spirit of benevolence and forgiveness. During a time of personal weakness and great troubles for the Saints in Missouri, William W. Phelps betrayed the Prophet Joseph to his enemies. Later, when Phelps in bitter sorrow and repentance wished to return to fellowship in the Church, Joseph freely forgave him. Wrote Joseph: “Come on, dear brother, since the war is past, For friends at first, are friends again at last” (HC 4:164).

With what, then, are we to be generous as we serve others, in addition to our forgiveness? Certainly we are to be generous with our *time*.

I can think of no one who gives of himself more fully all day every day than does our beloved prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley. His grueling schedule, which would wear out men many years his junior, along with his constant desire to reach out to all of God's children and a deep conviction that “all are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33) combine to make him an extremely effective leader and superb example to all.

When I think of people who give willingly of their time in the service of others, my thoughts turn often to the example of our wonderful service missionaries who serve in the Salt Lake Inner City Pilot Project. This project, which has the goal of increasing the self-reliance of inner-city dwellers in Salt Lake City, will provide nearly 500,000 person-hours of voluntary service to thousands of receivers this year alone. The project is blessing the lives of thousands, in no small measure because of the consecrated service of hundreds of volunteers who wish only to help others as God has given them the strength and capacity to do so. I salute them for their benevolence!

Jesus commands us to give generously of our *talents* in the service of others. In His masterful parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14–30, Jesus spoke of three men to whom had been entrusted varying amounts of talents according to their differing abilities. Two of the servants magnified their talents, increasing that which had been entrusted to them, but the third, too frightened, and perhaps too slothful to act, hid his talent “in the earth” and did nothing with it. The first two were commended by their Lord, but the one who had been untrue to the trust reposed in him was strongly rebuked, and that which he had was given to another.

Jesus expects us to magnify our talents, to be anxiously engaged in our labors, to be more competent and qualified in our service.

A few years ago the *Wall Street Journal* recounted a heartwarming tale of one who magnified his talents in providing compassionate

Christlike service to one of God’s children. More than twenty years ago, Dr. Ian Jackson, a world-famous craniofacial surgeon, was on a charity medical mission from his native Scotland to Peru. There he met David Lopez, a tiny Indian boy just two years old who had virtually no face at all. A gaping hole covered the area where his mouth and nose should have been. There were no upper teeth or upper jaw. To drink, David simply tilted back his head and poured the liquid straight down. His lower teeth could actually touch his forehead. Most of David’s face had literally been eaten away by a terrible parasitic disease called leishmaniasis.

Relief workers begged Dr. Jackson to help. He was leaving for Scotland the next day but agreed to try to rebuild David’s face if the boy could come to Scotland. Eventually a way was found, and the Jacksons went to Glasgow Airport to pick up David. As he walked down the ramp, they saw a tiny boy wearing scuffed white boots and a hand-knit poncho. A woolen cap was pulled so low on his head that only his big brown eyes and the round hole beneath them were visible.

The Jacksons took David into their home and into their hearts. There followed long years of surgery—more than eighty operations in all—as Dr. Jackson attempted to give David a new face. All of the doctor’s services were donated. Each summer, as other children played, David was in the hospital, his head swathed in bandages.

The painstaking, pioneering surgical efforts to rebuild David’s face went on for fifteen years. Today David looks like a young man who has been in a serious automobile accident, but he is well-adjusted and fully functional. He used to be teased and tormented about his looks, but over the years that has died away.

In 1982 Mrs. Jackson flew to Peru to try to find David’s parents. After a long journey downriver from a remote Catholic mission, David’s father was found. He explained that the boy had been born healthy but that he

developed leishmaniasis after having been bitten by an infected sand fly. The father took his son to the mission to seek treatment.

The father gave permission to the Jacksons—who had developed a deep love for David—to adopt him as their own. Since 1984 David Lopez has been David Jackson. (See Neal Templin, “Look of Love: As His Face Is Molded, Boy Finds His Surgeon Becoming His Father,” *Wall Street Journal*, 13 November 1992, A1.)

I don’t know whether Dr. Jackson is a Christian or not, but I do know he has magnified his talents in doing God’s work. “When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17).

Jesus commands that we be generous with our *substance*. How grateful I am that since its beginnings the Church has organized to assist its members to provide for themselves and others, ensuring their physical, spiritual, social, and emotional welfare. The Church also sponsors humanitarian relief and development projects around the world that benefit others not of our faith. These projects include emergency relief assistance in times of disaster and programs that strengthen the productivity and self-reliance of individuals and families and increase the capacities of communities and institutions to serve others. Hundreds of full-time volunteers with skills and experience in medicine, education, agriculture, business, social work, and so on serve throughout the world.

In 1999, just under 500,000 days of labor were donated to Church welfare facilities. That year, in the United States and Canada alone, the Church operated 108 bishops’ storehouses, 97 canneries, and 79 priesthood-managed production projects. Nearly 80,000 people were placed in gainful employment worldwide in 1999.

During the period from 1986 to 1999, the Church provided humanitarian assistance in more than 104 major natural and man-made disasters, including the Rwanda conflict in 1994; the Kobe, Japan, earthquake in 1995; the Bosnia/Croatia/Serbia conflict in 1994 and 1996;

U.S. Midwest flooding in 1993 and 1997; crop failure in North Korea in 1996 and 1997; Hurricane Mitch in Central America in 1998; and the Turkey and Taiwan earthquakes in 1999. Very recently the First Presidency announced that three million dollars would be used for relief in Mozambique, which has been ravaged, as you know, by terrible flooding. The total value of humanitarian service rendered from 1985 to 1998 was well over 220 million dollars.

Time does not permit a detailed presentation of the full extent of welfare and humanitarian service projects supported by the Church over the last several years. But I cannot refrain from mentioning a few, as follows:

- America's Promise, chaired by General Colin Powell, invited the Church to participate in its 1999 initiative. The organization serves, through volunteers and in-kind donations, some of the most needy youths and their families in six major metropolitan areas across the nation. The Church provided food, clothing, hygiene kits, school kits, and newborn kits valued at nearly one million dollars.
- On July 16, 1999, a letter requesting donations of quilts for the people of Kosovo was sent by the Presiding Bishopric to ecclesiastical leaders throughout the United States and Canada. The Relief Society was given responsibility for coordination of this effort. The letter originally requested 30,000 quilts. As of March 1 of this year, 121,962 quilts had been received from Latter-day Saints and others in the continental U.S., Canada, Australia, Taiwan, and Singapore. Five hundred quilts were made by women in the Utah State Penitentiary. Others were received from female inmates in one of the federal prisons. A woman from West Yellowstone, Montana, wrote: "I am 87 years old and cannot walk, but I can still quilt a bit. I have hugged these little blankets and have told them to 'fulfill the measure of their creation,' so I hope they keep a little one warm and give comfort." I could go on

with quilt stories, but those mentioned illustrate the extent of this Christlike work of compassion.

- On July 11, 1999, a peaceful Sunday morning in Riverdale, Utah, an irrigation canal broke, flooding nearly one hundred homes with water and an estimated 350,000 cubic yards of sand and mud. Within a few hours priesthood leaders from more than forty stakes had met and agreed upon a course of action. The next morning, volunteers in the hundreds and then thousands began the onerous task of pumping and shoveling out basements, driveways, lawns, and roadways; disposing of the sand, mud, and water involved; and salvaging and restoring furniture, clothing, records, books, and all of the treasured accumulations of dozens of families. It was a huge task. But the willing work of thousands, striving together as friends and neighbors, lightened the load and dried the tears of those who had lost much they held dear. Latter-day Saints and those of other faiths worked side by side. Community organizations, local governments, and the American Red Cross filled vital roles. As community members worked together in Christlike service, their love and understanding for each other increased, and a spirit of unity filled every heart. In serving others, they found their own better natures, and, may I venture to say, some, at least, developed a better understanding of Christ and His place in their lives.

These few examples—and I could go on and on with others—will, I hope, convey to you something of the breadth and depth of the Church's great work of providing temporal service to others.

One of the miracles that happens when we give of our substance is that God provides more. As President Spencer W. Kimball reminded us, "What glorious consequences can flow from mundane acts and from small but deliberate deeds!" (*TSWK*, 252).

President Brigham Young grew to know that God provides for those who give freely of their substance to others. He wrote:

The first year that I came into this valley I had not flour enough to last my family until harvest, and that I had brought with me, and persons were coming to my house every day for bread. I had the blues about [it] one day; I went down to the old fort, and by the time I got back to my house I was completely cured. I said to my wife, "Do not let a person come here for food and go away empty handed, for if you do we shall suffer before harvest; but if you give to every individual that comes we shall have enough to last us through."

I have proven this many a time, and we have again proven it this year. I have plenty on hand, and shall have plenty, if I keep giving away. More than two hundred persons eat from my provisions every day, besides my own family and those who work for me.

I intend to keep doing so, that my bread may hold out, for if I do not I shall come short.

Do you believe that principle? I know it is true, because I have proven it so many times. [JD 3:332–33]

Jesus commands us to be generous with our testimonies of Him and His gospel. One of the most severe rebukes given by the Lord in this dispensation was uttered by the Savior to missionaries who would not fulfill their sacred obligations to bear testimony:

But with some I am not well pleased, for they will not open their mouths, but they hide the talent which I have given unto them, because of the fear of man. Wo unto such, for mine anger is kindled against them. [D&C 60:2]

A tender story from our early pioneer days in the American South illustrates the power of testimony. A century ago, feelings of misunderstanding and intolerance toward the Latter-day Saints periodically erupted into senseless violence in the South, with eight murders and

many brutal assaults on our missionaries or local priesthood leaders from 1879 to 1900.

During the summer of 1878, Elder Frank Croft, a missionary in northern Alabama, was forcibly taken against his will by "armed and vicious men" to be whipped. He was tied to a tree for that purpose. In the struggle a letter from his mother fell from Elder Croft's pocket. The leader of the mob picked it up and read from it:

"Surely, my boy, they who are mistreating you Elders know not what they do or they would not do it. Sometime, somewhere, they will understand and then they will regret their action and they will honor you for the glorious work you are doing. So be patient, my son; love those who mistreat you and say all manner of evil against you and the Lord will bless you and magnify you in their eyes and your mission will be gloriously successful. Remember also, my son, that day and night, your mother is praying for you always."

[The leader of the mob read the whole letter to himself and then said to his companions:]

*"Men, after reading this Mormon's mother's letter, I just can't go ahead with the job. Maybe we had better let him go." ["A Mother's Letter Saves Her Son's Life," in chapter 22 of Bryant S. Hinckley, *The Faith of Our Pioneer Fathers* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1956), 257–59]*

They did indeed let Elder Croft go unharmed, his life spared by a mother's plea for her son.

This advice given by the Savior to the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1829 applies still in our day:

Fear not to do good, my sons, for whatsoever ye sow, that shall ye also reap; therefore, if ye sow good ye shall also reap good for your reward.

Therefore, fear not, little flock; do good; let earth and hell combine against you, for if ye are built upon my rock, they cannot prevail. [D&C 6:33–34]

President Spencer W. Kimball pointed out that "the most vital thing we can do is to express our testimonies through service, which will, in turn, produce spiritual growth, greater

commitment, and a greater capacity to keep the commandments" (TSWK, 254).

In the final analysis, then, the greatest testimony we can ever give to others is an exemplary life devoted to service. "Service," said President Marion G. Romney, "is not something we endure on this earth so we can earn the right to live in the celestial kingdom. Service is the very fiber of which an exalted life in the celestial kingdom is made" (CR, October 1982, 135; or "The Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance," *Ensign*, November 1982, 93).

Finally, Jesus asks us to be generous with our love. These simple words from a beloved hymn express that sweet sentiment well:

*Because I have been blessed by thy great love, dear
Lord,
I'll share thy love again, according to thy word.
I shall give love to those in need; I'll show that love
by word and deed:
Thus shall my thanks be thanks indeed.
["Because I Have Been Given Much," Hymns,
1985, no. 219]*

May each of us "be gentle and loving in deed and in thought, For these are the things Jesus taught" ("I'm Trying to Be Like Jesus," *Songbook*, 78–79).

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.