

“Extending Forgiveness”

A Sacrament Meeting Talk

Given November 24, 2013

Bloomington 8th Ward

By Bruce Wilcox

INTRODUCTION

I am humbled by the opportunity and challenge of serving [in this capacity] [as the second assistant in the ward high priest group leadership]. It is my observation that a call to serve as a second counselor in a given presidency or bishopric is often extended to not the most qualified individual available but to one whom the Lord wishes to bless with growth through association with the presidency and the training that comes with service in the kingdom. I feel truly blessed to be able serve with Brothers Alldredge and Mahoney and Gledhill and associate with the many exceptional men of the High Priest group of this ward. I pledge to my Heavenly Father and to you to do my best to magnify my calling and contribute to the progress of our group and ward.

As disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, our Master calls upon us to live up to some very high standards. You will remember how taught in the sermon on the mount, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time” and then he would quote one of the laws given in the law of Moses followed by the words, “but I say unto you...” and then he would describe a higher law that he called on his disciples to live. And in each case these higher laws focused on the quality of the intents of our hearts in addition to the quality of our actions.

Among the most challenging of the higher laws given by the Savior was expressed when he taught his disciples to pray. Included in that exemplary prayer commonly known as the Lord’s Prayer is the phrase, “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”. He immediately followed the prayer with the statement. “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

It is his will that we should forgive those who trespass against us. And as he taught Peter, the requirement to forgive is in place even if the trespass occurs 490 times.

When someone else hurts us in some way, the instinct of the natural man within us is to seek retribution, to strike back, to ensure that they pay a price for the offense given.

But this is not the Lord’s way.

THE LORD’S WAY

The Lord’s way of dealing with those who trespass against us was reiterated and detailed in modern revelation. In September of 1831, some of the elders of the Church were being critical of the Prophet Joseph Smith. To these elders the Lord gave his word on the matter, as recorded in verses 7 thru 11 of Section 64 of the Doctrine and Covenants.

In verses 7 and 8 we read the following: There are those who have sought occasion against him [that is Joseph Smith] without cause; Nevertheless, he has sinned; but verily I say unto you, I, the Lord, forgive sins unto those who confess their sins before me and ask forgiveness, who have not sinned unto death. My disciples, in days of old, sought occasion against one another and forgave not one another in their hearts; and for this evil they were afflicted and sorely chastened.

Notice the Lord indicates he is displeased when we "seek occasion" (that is to look for opportunities to find fault) -- whether it be with a cause or without a cause, it does not matter.

He also expressed the idea that failure to forgive one another in our hearts is "evil" in his sight.

He went on to summarize in verses 9 through 11, his requirements when someone trespasses against us as follows:

In verse 9 we read, 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.

And verse 10, I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men.

And sometimes we stop reading after verse 10. And when we do, we do a real disservice to many among us. For there are too many among us who have been the victims of grievous offenses which have caused them long-term pain and significant emotional and spiritual damage. And when we stop at this point, these victims often walk away with the wrong message. They get the message that the perpetrators of heinous acts against them are supposed to receive a pass for their offenses, that they are supposed to deny the impact of the acts committed against them, and act like it didn't happen.

Unless we go on to verse 11, they do not get the Lord's intent.

In verse 11 we read, "And ye ought to say in your hearts — let God judge between me and thee, and reward thee according to thy deeds."

Forgiveness does not mean you are letting someone off the hook. It means you are passing it on to someone else, passing it on to God. Forgiveness for these individuals and for all of us requires that we cultivate the ability to trust that God will administer righteous judgment.

HOW FORGIVENESS BLESSES

In a General Conference talk, Elder James E. Faust quoted a definition of forgiveness given by Dr. Sidney Simon, “Forgiveness is freeing up and putting to better use the energy once consumed by holding grudges, harboring resentments, and nursing unhealed wounds. It is rediscovering the strengths we always had and relocating our limitless capacity to understand and accept other people and ourselves.”

As Brother Patric Lewis recently shared, holding on to the desire for retribution for offenses received is a toxin that poisons us rather than those who have hurt us.

How can we find the power to detoxify our systems from the natural response to harbor ill will rather than let go and let God take over the matter?

HOW TO LEARN TO EXTEND FORGIVENESS

As King Benjamin taught his people, the power to put off the tendencies of the natural man, and put on more saintly attributes comes only through the power of the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. Ultimately, the power to extend forgiveness is a spiritual gift, a grace given by the Lord through the medium of His Spirit.

But we can prepare to receive that gift by taking some steps ourselves.

First, we can remind ourselves of those times when we have found ourselves in a place of having offended our Heavenly Father and have pleaded unto him for mercy. In the context of needing forgiveness for our offenses to the Savior, we become extremely reticent to deny others the mercy we so desperately want for ourselves.

Second, as we experience mercy and the miracle of forgiveness from our Savior, we gain an appreciation for the supernal gift that it is and desire to extend that same gift to others.

And Third. If we can develop the paradigm that it is the nature of this life experience that we often make mistakes then learn from them, we can allow ourselves and others the gift of a “do over” – the opportunity to erase from the books of our lives those sentences and paragraphs that we would like to rewrite.

If we do our part, the Lord will help us forgive, by the power of His Spirit.

FAMILIES

Nowhere is the need for the giving and receiving of forgiveness more acute than in our homes, in our families, and in our marriages.

Someone has said that life is like learning to play the violin while on stage. And it is our family members are in earshot of every squeak and squawk.

If we do not learn and practice the giving and receiving of forgiveness, the accumulation of resentment will poison the family tree so that the fruit there of will be tainted and root system compromised. And when the winds of adversity blow, the tree may not stand.

One of the mistakes we make in our families, and we men are frequently guilty of this, is to make it difficult for others to forgive us by failing to acknowledge and minister to the hurt we inadvertently cause other family members. Sometimes we will unthinkingly say or do something that is hurtful, and when confronted about it, we focus on explaining our intentions or defending our ego rather than validating and ministering unto the pain that was caused. I submit to you that it is best to set aside the need to protect ourselves and seek to understand the situation from the other family member's point of view. Then express sorrow for the injury caused and ask for forgiveness for having caused pain -- even if you do not feel you are guilty of an intentional offense.

It is my prayer that our homes might become a place where we frequently practice the virtue of extending forgiveness one to another.

CONCLUSION

It was Alexander Pope who penned the famous line, "To err is human; to forgive, divine".

He also wrote a companion verse, a prayer which we too might want to echo.

*Teach me to feel another's woe,
to hide the fault I see,
that mercy I to others show,
that mercy show to me.*

I pray that each of us might in our homes, in our extended families, in our church and business interactions, and in our communities be found extending mercy to others that we might have claim on mercy ourselves.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.