

THE HEALING POWER OF FORGIVENESS

IDEAS FOR APPLICATION

According to your own needs and circumstances, follow one or both of these suggestions.

- Study the examples of forgiveness in the following scripture passages: Luke 23:33–34; Acts 7:58–60; 1 Nephi 7:8–21.
- Make a commitment to be more forgiving and more worthy of the forgiveness of others.

READING ASSIGNMENT

Study the following article. If you are married, read and discuss the article with your spouse.

"OF YOU IT IS REQUIRED TO FORGIVE"

President Gordon B. Hinckley
First Counselor in the First Presidency

A spirit of forgiveness and an attitude of love and compassion toward those who may have wronged us is of the very essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Each of us has need of this spirit. The whole world has need of it. The Lord taught it. He exemplified it as none other has exemplified it.

In the time of His agony on the cross of Calvary, with vile and hateful accusers before Him, those who had brought Him to this terrible crucifixion, He cried out, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

None of us is called on to forgive so generously, but each of us is under a divinely spoken obligation to reach out with pardon and mercy. The Lord has declared in words of revelation: "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.

"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.

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

"And ye ought to say in your hearts—let God judge between me and thee, and reward thee according to thy deeds" (D&C 64:8–11).

How much we need application of this God-given principle and its companion principle, repentance!

We see the need for it in the homes of the people, where tiny molehills of misunderstanding are fanned into mountains of argument. We see it among neighbors, where insignificant differences lead to undying bitterness. We see it in business associates who quarrel and refuse to compromise and forgive when, in most instances, if there were a willingness to sit down together and speak quietly one to another, the matter could be resolved to the blessing of all. Rather, they spend their days nurturing grudges and planning retribution.

In that first year of the organization of the Church, when the Prophet Joseph Smith was repeatedly arrested and tried on false charges by those who sought to injure him, the Lord said to him through revelation, "Whosoever shall go to law with thee shall be cursed by the law" (D&C 24:17). I have seen that in our time among some of those who have vindictively pursued their nurtured grudges. Even among some of those who win their contests there appears to be little peace of mind, and while they may have gained dollars, they have lost something more precious.

Avoid Bitterness

Guy de Maupassant, the French writer, tells the story of a peasant named Hauchecome who came on market day to the village. While walking through the public square, his eye caught sight of a piece of string lying on the cobblestones. He picked it up and put it in his pocket. His actions were observed by the village harness maker, with whom he had previously had a dispute.

Later in the day the loss of a purse was reported. Hauchecome was arrested on the accusation of

the harness maker. He was taken before the mayor, to whom he protested his innocence, showing the piece of string that he had picked up. But he was not believed and was laughed at.

The next day the purse was found, and Hauchecome was absolved of any wrongdoing. But, resentful of the indignity he had suffered because of a false accusation, he became embittered and would not let the matter die. Unwilling to forgive and forget, he thought and talked of little else. He neglected his farm. Everywhere he went, everyone he met had to be told of the injustice. By day and by night he brooded over it. Obsessed with his grievance, he became desperately ill and died. In the delirium of his death struggles, he repeatedly murmured, "A piece of string, a piece of string" (*The Works of Guy de Maupassant* [n.d.], 34–38).

With variations of characters and circumstances, that story could be repeated many times in our own day. How difficult it is for any of us to forgive those who have injured us. We are all prone to brood on the evil done us. That brooding becomes as a gnawing and destructive canker. Is there a virtue more in need of application in our time than the virtue of forgiving and forgetting? There are those who would look upon this as a sign of weakness. Is it? I submit that it takes neither strength nor intelligence to brood in anger over wrongs suffered, to go through life with a spirit of vindictiveness, to dissipate one's abilities in planning retribution. There is no peace in the nursing of a grudge. There is no happiness in living for the day when you can "get even."

Paul speaks of "the weak and beggarly elements" of our lives (see Galatians 4:9). Is there anything more weak or beggarly than the disposition to wear out one's life in an unending round of bitter thoughts and scheming gestures toward those who may have affronted us?

Joseph F. Smith presided over the Church at a time of great bitterness toward our people. He was the target of vile accusations, of a veritable drumbeat of criticism by editorial writers even in his own community. He was lampooned, cartooned, and ridiculed. Listen to his response to those who made sport of demeaning him: "Let them alone. Let them go. Give them the liberty of speech they want. Let them tell their own story, and write their own doom" (*Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. [1939], 339). And then, with an outreaching spirit of forgiving and forgetting, he went ahead with the great and positive work of leading the Church forward to new growth and remarkable accomplishments. At the time of his death, many of those who had ridiculed him wrote tributes of praise concerning him.

I recall listening at length to a couple who sat across the desk from me. There was bitterness between them. I know that at one time their love was deep and true. But each had developed a habit of speaking of the faults of the other. Unwilling to forgive the kind of mistakes we all make, and unwilling to forget them and live above them with forbearance, they had carped at one another until the love they once knew had been smothered. It had turned to ashes with the decree of a so-called "no-fault" divorce. Now there is only loneliness and recrimination. I am satisfied that had there been even a small measure of repentance and forgiveness, they would still be together, enjoying the companionship that had so richly blessed their earlier years.

Peace through Forgiveness

If there be any who nurture in their hearts the poisonous brew of enmity toward another, I plead with you to ask the Lord for strength to forgive. This expression of desire will be of the very substance of your repentance. It may not be easy, and it may not come quickly. But if you will seek it with sincerity and cultivate it, it *will* come. And even though he whom you have forgiven continues to pursue and threaten you, you will know you have done what you could to effect a reconciliation. There will come into your heart a peace otherwise unattainable. That peace will be the peace of Him who said:

"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" (Matthew 6:14–15).

Prodigal Son

I know of no more beautiful story in all literature than that found in the fifteenth chapter of Luke. It is the story of a repentant son and a forgiving father. It is the story of a son who wasted his inheritance in riotous living, rejecting his father's counsel, spurning those who loved him. When he had spent all, he was hungry and friendless, and "when he came to himself" (Luke 15:17), he turned back to his father, who, on seeing him afar off, "ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

I ask you to read that story. Every parent ought to read it again and again. It is large enough to encompass every household, and enough larger than that to encompass all mankind, for are we not all prodigal sons and daughters who need to repent and partake of the forgiving mercy of our Heavenly Father and then follow His example?

His Beloved Son, our Redeemer, reaches out to us in forgiveness and mercy, but in so doing He commands repentance. A true and magnanimous spirit of forgiveness will become an expression of that required repentance. Said the Lord—and I quote from a revelation given to the Prophet Joseph:

"Therefore I command you to repent—repent, lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not."

"For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent;

"But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I;

"Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit. . . .

"Learn of me, and listen to my words; walk in the meekness of my Spirit, and you shall have peace in me" (D&C 19:15–18, 23).

Such is the commandment, and such is the promise of Him who, in His great exemplary prayer, pleaded, "Father, . . . forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:9, 12).

"Bind Up . . . Wounds"

Are not the words of Abraham Lincoln beautiful which he spoke out of the tragedy of a terrible civil war: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, . . . let us . . . bind up the . . . wounds" (in John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations* [1968], 640).

My brothers and sisters, let us bind up the wounds—oh, the many wounds that have been caused by cutting words, by stubbornly cultivated grievances, by scheming plans to "get even" with those who may have wronged us. We all have a little of this spirit of revenge in us. Fortunately, we all have the power to rise above it, if we will "clothe [ourselves] with the bond of charity, as with a mantle, which is the bond of perfectness and peace" (D&C 88:125).

"To err is human, to forgive divine" (Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, 2:1711). There is no peace in reflecting on the pain of old wounds. There is peace only in repentance and forgiveness. This is the sweet peace of the Christ, who said, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

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