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The Sanctifying Work of Welfare

The work of caring for one another and being “kind to the poor” is a sanctifying work, commanded of the Father.

Good morning, brothers and sisters. In 1897 a young David O. McKay stood at a door with a tract in his hand. As a missionary in Stirling, Scotland, he had done this many times before. But on that day a very haggard woman opened the door and stood before him. She was poorly dressed and had sunken cheeks and unkempt hair.

She took the tract Elder McKay offered to her and spoke six words that he subsequently would never forget: “Will this buy me any bread?”

This encounter left a lasting impression on the young missionary. He later wrote: “From that moment I had a deeper realization that the Church of Christ should be and is interested in the temporal salvation of man. I walked away from the door feeling that that [woman], with . . . bitterness in [her heart] toward man and God, [was] in no position to receive the message of the gospel. [She was] in need of temporal help, and there was no organization, so far as I could learn, in Stirling that could give it to [her].”¹

A few decades later the world groaned under the burden of the

Great Depression. It was during that time, on April 6, 1936, that President Heber J. Grant and his counselors, J. Reuben Clark and David O. McKay, announced what would later become known as the welfare program of the Church. Interestingly, two weeks later Elder Melvin J. Ballard was appointed as its first chairman and Harold B. Lee its first managing director.

This was no ordinary endeavor. Although the Lord had raised up remarkable souls to administer it, President J. Reuben Clark made it clear that “the setting up of the [welfare] machinery is the result of a revelation by the Holy Ghost to President Grant, that it has been carried on since that time by equivalent revelations which have come to the brethren who have had it in charge.”²

The commitment of Church leaders to relieve human suffering was as certain as it was irrevocable. President Grant wanted “a system that would . . . reach out and take care of the people no matter what the cost.” He said he would even go so far as to “close the seminaries, shut down missionary work for a period of time, or even close the temples, but they

would not let the people go hungry.”³

I was at President Gordon B. Hinckley’s side in Managua, Nicaragua, when he spoke to 1,300 members of the Church who had survived a devastating hurricane that claimed more than 11,000 lives. “As long as the Church has resources,” he said to them, “we will not let you go hungry or without clothing or without shelter. We shall do all that we can to assist in the way that the Lord has designated that it should be done.”⁴

One of the distinguishing characteristics of this inspired gospel-centered endeavor is its emphasis on personal responsibility and self-reliance. President Marion G. Romney explained: “Many programs have been set up by well-meaning individuals to aid those who are in need. However, many of these programs are designed with the short-sighted objective of ‘helping people,’ as opposed to ‘helping people help themselves.’”⁵

Self-reliance is a product of provident living and exercising economic self-discipline. From the beginning the Church has taught that families—to the extent they can—need to assume responsibility for their own temporal welfare. Each generation is required to learn anew the foundational principles of self-reliance: avoid debt, implement principles of thrift, prepare for times of distress, listen to and follow the words of the living oracles, develop the discipline to distinguish between needs and wants and then live accordingly.

The purpose, promises, and principles that reinforce our work of caring for the poor and needy extend far beyond the bounds of mortality. This sacred work is not only to benefit and bless those who suffer or are in need. As sons and daughters of God, we cannot inherit the full measure of eternal life without being fully invested



family history exemplifies a commitment to care for those in need. Many have heard of the Willie and Martin handcart companies and how these faithful pioneers suffered and died as they endured winter cold and debilitating conditions during their trek west. Robert Taylor Burton, one of my great-great-grandfathers, was one of those whom Brigham Young asked to ride out and rescue those dear, desperate Saints.

Of this time Grandfather wrote in his journal: “Snow deep [and] very cold. . . . So cold that [we] could not move. . . . Thermometer 11 degrees below zero [-24°C] . . . ; so cold the people could not travel.”¹²

Life-saving supplies were distributed to the stranded Saints, but “in spite of all [the rescuers] could do many were laid to rest by the wayside.”¹³

As the rescued Saints were traversing a portion of the trail through Echo

St. Catherine, Jamaica



in caring for each other while we are here on earth. It is in the benevolent practice of sacrifice and giving of ourselves to others that we learn the celestial principles of sacrifice and consecration.⁶

The great King Benjamin taught that one of the reasons we impart of our substance to the poor and administer to their relief is so that we may retain a remission of our sins from day to day and walk guiltless before God.⁷

Since the foundation of the world, the cloth of righteous societies has ever been woven from the golden threads of charity. We yearn for a peaceful world and for prosperous communities. We pray for kind and virtuous societies where wickedness is forsaken and goodness and right prevail. No matter how many temples we build, no matter how large our membership grows, no matter how positively we are perceived in the eyes of the world—should we fail in this great core commandment to “succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees,”⁸ or turn our hearts from those who suffer and mourn, we are under condemnation and cannot please the Lord⁹ and the jubilant hope of our hearts will ever be distant.

Throughout the world, nearly 28,000 bishops search after the poor to administer to their needs. Each

bishop is assisted by a ward council consisting of priesthood and auxiliary leaders, including a devoted Relief Society president. They can “fly to the relief of the stranger; . . . pour in oil and wine to the wounded heart of the distressed; . . . [and] dry up the tears of the orphan and make the widow’s heart to rejoice.”¹⁰

The hearts of Church members and leaders throughout the world are being positively influenced and guided by the doctrines and divine spirit of loving and caring for their neighbors.

One priesthood leader in South America was burdened by the hunger and deprivation of the members of his little stake. Unwilling to allow the children to suffer in hunger, he found an empty plot of land and organized the priesthood to cultivate and plant it. They found an old horse and hooked up a primitive plow and began working the ground. But before they could finish, tragedy struck and the old horse died.

Rather than allow their brothers and sisters to suffer hunger, the brethren of the priesthood strapped the old plow to their own backs and pulled it through the unforgiving ground. They literally took upon themselves the yoke of the suffering and burdens of their brothers and sisters.¹¹

A moment in time from my own



Canyon, several wagons pulled off to assist in the arrival of a baby girl. Robert noticed the young mother did not have enough clothing to keep her newborn infant warm. In spite of the freezing temperatures, he “took off his own homespun shirt and gave it to the mother to [wrap] the baby.”¹⁴ The child was given the name Echo—Echo Squires—as a remembrance of the place and circumstances of her birth.

In later years Robert was called to the Presiding Bishopric of the Church, where he served for more than three decades. At age 86 Robert Taylor Burton fell ill. He gathered his family to his bedside to give them his final blessing. Among his last words was this simple but very profound counsel: “Be kind to the poor.”¹⁵

Brothers and sisters, we honor those innovative giants whom the Lord raised up to organize and administer the institutional outreach to needy members of His Church. We honor those who in our day reach out in countless and often silent ways to “be kind to the poor,” feed the hungry, clothe the naked, minister to the sick, and visit the captive.

This is the sacred work the Savior expects from His disciples. It is the work He loved when He walked the earth. It is the work I know we would find Him doing were He here among us today.¹⁶

Seventy-five years ago a system devoted to the spiritual and temporal salvation of mankind rose from humble beginnings. Since that time it has ennobled and blessed the lives of tens of millions of people throughout the world. The prophetic welfare plan is not merely an interesting footnote in the history of the Church. The principles upon which it is based define who we are as a people. It is the essence of who we are as individual disciples of our Savior and Exemplar, Jesus the Christ.

The work of caring for one another and being “kind to the poor” is a sanctifying work, commanded of the Father and divinely designed to bless, refine, and exalt His children. May we follow the Savior’s counsel to the certain lawyer in the parable of the good Samaritan: “Go, and do thou likewise.”¹⁷ Of this I testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■

NOTES

1. *Cherished Experiences from the Writings of President David O. McKay*, comp. Clare Middlemiss (1955), 189.
2. J. Reuben Clark Jr., “Testimony of Divine Origin of Welfare Plan,” *Church News*, Aug. 8, 1951, 15; see also Glen L. Rudd, *Pure Religion* (1995), 47.
3. Glen L. Rudd, *Pure Religion*, 34.
4. In “President Hinckley Visits Hurricane Mitch Victims and Mid-Atlantic United States,” *Ensign*, Feb. 1999, 74.
5. Marion G. Romney, “The Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance,” *Liahona*, Mar. 2009, 15; *Ensign*, Nov. 1982, 91.
6. See Doctrine and Covenants 104:15–18; see also Doctrine and Covenants 105:2–3.
7. See Mosiah 4:26–27.
8. Doctrine and Covenants 81:5; see also Matthew 22:36–40.
9. See Doctrine and Covenants 104:18.
10. Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church*, 4:567–68.
11. Interview with Harold C. Brown, former Welfare Services Department managing director.
12. Journal of Robert T. Burton, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Nov. 2–6, 1856.
13. Robert Taylor Burton, in Janet Burton Seegmiller, *“Be Kind to the Poor”: The Life Story of Robert Taylor Burton* (1988), 164.
14. Lenore Gunderson, in Jolene S. Allphin, *Tell My Story, Too*, tellyourstorytoo.com/art_imagepages/image43.html.
15. Robert Taylor Burton, in Seegmiller, *“Be Kind to the Poor,”* 416.
16. See Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “You Are My Hands,” *Liahona* and *Ensign*, May 2010, 68–70, 75.
17. Luke 10:37.