

The love of a stake president

To you who are bishops and stake presidents, how I wish you could have been part of the meeting I attended with a handful of regional representatives. We heard Elder L. Tom Perry as he compared those who are prospective elders and those who are not active—the future great-grandfathers—to a thermometer. We were reminded that many of those individuals are more than just warm. They would come back if someone would just encourage and show the way.

I would like to tell you of a stake conference I was assigned to attend. It was a reorganization; the stake president and his counselors would be released, and a new presidency would be called. The stake president was young and had served wonderfully for almost 10 years. He was a spiritual giant, but he was also an administrative giant. In my personal interview with him, he told me how he had delegated much of the responsibility for the stake functions to his counselors and to the high council and had thus freed himself to interview those who needed encouragement. Individuals and couples were invited to come to his office. There he got to know them, counseled with them, and invited them to do better, to put their lives in order, and to receive the blessings available to those who follow the Lord. He helped them by putting them in the care of a capable leader, a teacher who helped them to understand the beauties of the doctrine. Then he told me that

in these interviews he would often ask if they would like a blessing. “I have placed my hands on the heads of many members of the stake,” he said.

The next day in the general session of the stake conference, I doubt I have ever seen so many tears—not because they felt the president should not be released, but for the deep love of a young stake president who had blessed their lives. I felt prompted to ask, “How many of you have had the hands of the president on your heads?” I was amazed at the number of people who raised their hands. I thought to myself at the time, “How many of these people will bless the name of this great man, not only now but throughout the eternities?” Yes, these will be the great-grandfathers who will, because of this loving leader, leave a legacy of generations of thousands who will call him blessed.

The worth of souls

When we see the effect one person can have on the lives of so many, it perhaps is no wonder that the Lord reminded us, “Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God” (D&C 18:10).

I pray we all might consider what we can do individually to assist those who will be the future great-grandparents, whether a little child, a teenager, or an adult, so that each will leave a righteous legacy of those who know and love the Lord. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Elder Lynn G. Robbins

Sacrifice is never convenient

In Charles Dickens’s timeless classic *A Christmas Carol*, Bob Cratchit hoped to spend Christmas Day with his family. “If quite *convenient*, Sir,” he asked his employer, Mr. Scrooge.

“‘It’s *not convenient*,’ said Scrooge, ‘and it’s not fair. If I was to stop half-a-crown for it, you’d think yourself ill used.’ . . .

“‘And yet,’ said Scrooge, ‘you don’t think *me* ill-used, when I pay a day’s wages for no work.’

“The clerk observed that it was only once a year.

“A poor excuse for picking a man’s pocket every twenty-fifth of December!” said Scrooge.”¹

For Scrooge—as with any selfish, or “natural,” man—sacrifice is never *convenient*.

The natural man has a tendency to think only of himself—not only to place himself first, but rarely, if ever, to place anyone else second, including God. For the natural man, sacrifice does not come naturally. He has an insatiable appetite for more. His so-called needs always seem to outpace his income so that having “enough” is forever out of reach, just as it was for the miser Scrooge.

Sacrifice is a hallmark of the faithful

Because the natural man tends to hoard or consume everything, the Lord wisely commanded ancient Israel to sacrifice not the last and poorest of the flock, but the firstlings—not the leftovers of the field, but the firstfruits (see Deuteronomy 26:2; Mosiah 2:3; Moses 5:5). Genuine sacrifice has been a hallmark of the faithful from the beginning.

Among those who do *not* sacrifice there are two extremes: one is the rich, gluttonous man who won’t and the other is the poor, destitute man who believes he can’t. But how can you ask someone who is starving to eat less? *Is* there a level of poverty *so* low that sacrifice should not be expected or a family so destitute that paying tithing should cease to be required?

Sacrifice made by the widow of Zarephath

The Lord often teaches using extreme circumstances to illustrate a principle. The story of the widow of Zarephath is an example of extreme poverty used to teach the doctrine that mercy cannot rob sacrifice any more than it can rob justice. In fact, the

truer measure of sacrifice isn’t so much what one gives to sacrifice as what one sacrifices to give (see Mark 12:43). Faith isn’t tested so much when the cupboard is full as when it is bare. In these defining moments, the crisis doesn’t create one’s character—it reveals it. The crisis is the test.

The widow of Zarephath lived in the days of the prophet Elijah, by whose word the Lord brought a drought upon the land for three and a half years (see Luke 4:25). The famine grew so severe that many were finally at the point of death. This is the circumstance in which we find the widow.

The Lord says to Elijah, “Arise, get thee to Zarephath . . . : behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee” (1 Kings 17:9). It is interesting that Elijah is not told to go to Zarephath until the widow and her son are at the point of death. It is at this extreme moment—facing starvation—that her faith will be tested.

As he comes into the city, he sees her gathering sticks.

“And he called to her, and said, Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.

“And as she was going to fetch it, he called to her, and said, Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand.

“And she said, As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die” (verses 10–12).

A “handful of meal” would be very little indeed, perhaps just enough for one serving, which makes Elijah’s response intriguing. Listen: “And Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake *first*” (v. 13; italics added).

Now doesn’t that sound selfish, asking not just for the first piece, but possibly the only piece? Didn’t our parents teach us to let other people go first and especially for

a gentleman to let a lady go first, let alone a starving widow? Her choice—does she eat, or does she sacrifice her last meal and hasten death? Perhaps she will sacrifice her own food, but could she sacrifice the food meant for her starving son?

Elijah understood the doctrine that blessings come *after* the trial of our faith (see Ether 12:6; D&C 132:5). He wasn't being selfish. As the Lord's servant, Elijah was there to give, not to take. Continuing from the narrative:

“But make me thereof a little cake *first* [the firstlings], and bring it unto me, and *after* make for thee and for thy son.

“For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth.

“And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days.

“And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah” (verses 13–16; italics added).

Paying tithing even when destitute

One reason the Lord illustrates doctrines with the most extreme circumstances is to eliminate excuses. If the Lord expects even the poorest widow to pay her mite, where does that leave all others who find that it is not *convenient* or easy to sacrifice?

No bishop, no missionary should ever hesitate or lack the faith to teach the law of tithing to the poor. The sentiment of “They can't *afford* to” needs to be replaced with “They can't afford *not* to.”

One of the first things a bishop *must* do to help the needy is ask them to pay their tithing. Like the widow, if a destitute family is faced with the decision of paying their tithing or eating, they should pay their tithing. The bishop can help them with their food and other basic needs until they become self-reliant.

In October of 1998, Hurricane Mitch devastated many parts of Central America. President Gordon B. Hinckley was very concerned for the victims of this disaster, many of whom lost everything—food, clothing, and household goods. He visited the Saints in the cities of San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, Honduras; and Managua, Nicaragua. And like the words of the loving prophet Elijah to a starving widow, this modern prophet's message in each city was similar—to sacrifice and be obedient to the law of tithing.

But how can you ask someone so destitute to sacrifice? President Hinckley knew that the food and clothing shipments they received would help them survive the crisis, but his concern and love for them went far beyond that. As important as humanitarian aid is, he knew that the most important assistance comes from God, not from man. The prophet wanted to help them unlock the windows of heaven as promised by the Lord in the book of Malachi (see Malachi 3:10; Mosiah 2:24).

President Hinckley taught them that if they would pay their tithing, they would always have food on their tables, they would always have clothing on their backs, and they would always have a roof over their heads.

Give the firstfruits, not the leftovers

When serving a meal, it is much easier to set one more plate at the beginning of the meal than it is to find food for a late-comer once the meal is over and the food has been served. Likewise, isn't it actually easier to give the Lord the firstlings or the firstfruits than it is to hope that there are sufficient “leftovers” for Him? As the founder of our feast, shouldn't *He* be the guest of honor, the first to be served?

My loving mother, Evelyn Robbins, taught me the law of tithing when I was four years old. She gave me an empty Band-Aid box, the tin kind with a snapping

lid. She taught me to keep my tithing pennies in it and then take it to the bishop. I am eternally grateful for her, for that Band-Aid box, and for the blessings that have come from paying tithing.

Obey the law of sacrifice more fully

In *A Christmas Carol*, Mr. Scrooge changed his ways—he was not the man he had been. Likewise, this is the gospel of repentance. If the Spirit is prompting us to more fully obey the law of sacrifice in our

lives, may we begin making that change today.

I am so grateful for the Savior, who was the perfect example of obedience through sacrifice—who offered “himself a sacrifice for sin” and became, in Lehi’s words, “the *firstfruits* unto God” (2 Nephi 2:7, 9; italics added). I bear witness of Him and of these, His doctrines, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTE

1. *The Annotated Christmas Carol*, ed. Michael Patrick Hearn (1976), 69; italics added.

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf

Only six months ago you faithful members of the Church of Jesus Christ sustained me as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. This calling came as a great surprise to many, but especially to our grandchildren, who said, “But he is our *Opa!* He is just a regular person. He played with us, and he used to cut our hair!”

After the October general conference, my wife and I talked to our children on the telephone, and one of our grandsons said, “Since we were so far away from you and could not be with you in Salt Lake City, at least you should have waved to us when you were giving your conference talk.” We have not yet been with our children and grandchildren until this general conference, and so I wave today, hoping to make a grandson happy. I also wave to all of you wonderful members, whose prayers and love are so important and appreciated by my wife and me.

Operating the bellows of an old organ

In my growing-up years in Germany, I attended church in many different locations and circumstances—in humble back rooms, in impressive villas, and in very functional, modern chapels. All of these buildings had

one important factor in common: the Spirit of God was present; the love of the Savior could be felt as we assembled as a branch or ward family.

The Zwickau chapel had an old air-driven organ. Every Sunday a young man was assigned to push up and down the sturdy lever that operated the bellows to make the organ work. Even before I was an Aaronic Priesthood bearer, I sometimes had the great privilege to assist in this important task.

While the congregation sang our beloved hymns of the Restoration, I pumped with all my strength so the organ would not run out of wind. The eyes of the organist unmistakably indicated whether I was doing fine or needed to increase my efforts quickly. I always felt honored by the importance of this duty and the trust that the organist had placed in me. It was a wonderful feeling of accomplishment to have a responsibility and to be part of this great work.

A stained-glass window of the First Vision

There was an additional benefit that came from this assignment: the bellows operator sat in a seat that offered a great view