

“Blessed Are the Peacemakers”

VERN P. STANFILL

Dear brothers and sisters, it is such an honor and pleasure to stand at this podium today and address you. I graduated from BYU more than forty years ago. I have a great love for this university and what it stands for. All those who have had the privilege of attending BYU are the beneficiaries of the sacrifices of millions across the world who love the Lord and His children. It is a great blessing to attend here, and, as with most blessings, it comes with a responsibility to reflect the principles and standards taught in this unique setting.

Making a Difference in the Lives of God’s Children

The BYU experience was life changing for me. It was here that I met Alicia, my wife of nearly forty-two years. It was here that I expanded my vision of possibilities, both temporally and spiritually. It was here that I strengthened my convictions and increased my desire to follow the Savior. It was here that I learned to learn. And it was here that I learned so much about loving God and His Son.

I share the expectation and the hope of those who have given so liberally that this experience will change you, draw you closer to the Savior, and prepare you in every way to make a difference in the world. In this crowd there may be the next Warren Buffett, Elon Musk, or J. K. Rowling. We appreciate the gifts in business, science, and the arts that brilliant people have given us. These and many others have used their wealth and success to benefit society. No one would argue with the fact that they have changed the world we live in.

Certainly there are people whose actions have changed the very course of history. Some have been good and others evil. Some have been neither particularly good nor evil, but their contributions have still been significant to the way our society functions. Today there are individuals labeled as influencers who change the way we dress, how we think, what we do in our spare time, and even what we become passionate about. Their influence often defies reason, and yet they change the world

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we live in. At least for a time. Perhaps time is the litmus test. When we cross to the other side of the veil, what will matter to us? An iPhone 13 or an act of kindness that brought us peace? Those who make a difference change generations by bringing people closer to the Savior. These actions will be eternally remembered.

Making this kind of difference in the lives of God’s children and in the eternities requires us to do things in a much more intimate way—the Savior’s way. It requires more than being on the forefront of the latest cultural or social issue. It requires a quiet awareness of the problems, sufferings, desires, and needs of those around us. The difference I am talking about demands compassion. Compassion is different than empathy or sympathy in that its very root means “suffer with.”¹ It requires action and is usually given individually in small ways. But generations may be changed.

Recently, in my personal studies, I was touched as I pondered the Sermon on the Mount. I read the Beatitudes in a different way. Most of the Savior’s teachings during His ministry were efforts to help us to *become* something. They were mostly dos—not don’ts. The word *beatitude* comes from the Latin adjective *beatus*, which means “happy,” “fortunate,” or “blissful.”² Much more than happiness or joy, the word *blessed* in the Savior’s teachings is defined as “an exclamation of the inner joy and peace that comes with being right with God.”³ Some define *beatitude* as “extreme blessedness.”⁴

Perhaps because of today’s culture of strife, division, and anger, I was particularly touched by Matthew 5:9: “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.”

I pondered what the Savior was truly trying to teach.

I believe that the expectation—the “do,” in this case—and the promised blessing may be grander than they appear at first. Is a peacemaker simply one who literally makes peace, resolves conflict, diffuses contention, or calms tense situations? Is a peacemaker a person who is gifted in the art of diplomacy, a good negotiator, or a mediator? Or is it someone capable of using words to bring others to their way of thinking? Perhaps all of these qualities are necessary, but I believe the Savior is speaking of another kind of peacemaker. I believe

He is speaking of those who extend the peace that He offers. They act in peace, peace is written on their countenances, and they represent the Prince of Peace.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a peacemaker as a person who “brings about peace,” especially by reconciling adversaries.⁵ King Benjamin taught, “The natural man is an enemy to God” (Mosiah 3:19). Maybe the Savior was speaking of peacemakers as those who are reconciled with God and who help others do the same by bringing them the peace the Savior offers.

Now, if you are thinking that being a peacemaker is too lofty an aspiration for you, I want to assure you that it is not. That is the beauty of it. Everyone can develop this attribute. If we look to the ministry of Christ, we see many examples of how He extended peace and comfort to those in need and helped them to draw closer to God. Let me share some examples.

The Woman at the Well

One of the most beautiful accounts in the New Testament is the Savior’s experience with the woman at the well. This woman had been married five times and currently was living with another man out of wedlock. She was likely an outcast in her village because of her choices and current circumstances. You can imagine that everything she had been taught by her traditional Samaritan faith would preclude her from ever finding the presence of God because of the life she was leading. She must have felt hopeless, trapped by her own sins and circumstances.

In a beautiful exchange, the Savior teaches her. At first her attitude is defensive, questioning why a Jew would even speak to her, since at the time Jews did not associate with Samaritans. She asks:

Art thou greater than our father Jacob, which gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children, and his cattle?

Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again:

But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life. [John 4:12–14]

Now the woman is interested, and she wants to know where she can find this never-ending water source:

The woman saith unto him, Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw. [John 4:15]

The woman's understanding increases even as He teaches her, and hope begins to well up in her:

The woman saith unto him, I know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things. [John 4:25]

And then, for the first time in His ministry, the Savior declares who He is:

Jesus saith unto her, I that speak unto thee am he. [John 4:26]

In a careful reading of these passages, you can see this woman's spirits lift during her brief interaction with the Savior. Her attitude evolves from guarded to inquisitive, then hopeful and embracing. She receives a spiritual witness of who He is. She wants to share that peace with others and hurries back to town and returns with more people for Jesus to teach. She literally brought people to Christ. She goes from outcast to peacemaker as she declares His divinity.

The Prophet Joseph in Liberty Jail

Another example of the Savior extending His peace is found in section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The Prophet Joseph Smith has been incarcerated for months in the cold, filthy dungeon of Liberty Jail. Mobs were attacking the Saints and driving them from their homes. They are deprived of their lands and food and falsely accused, but the government does nothing to assist them. In the depths of despair, the Prophet pleads with the Lord:

O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?

How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the

wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?

Yea, O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before thine heart shall be softened toward them, and thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them?

O Lord God Almighty, maker of heaven, earth, and seas, and of all things that in them are, and who controlllest and subjectest the devil, and the dark and benighted dominion of Sheol—stretch forth thy hand; let thine eye pierce; let thy pavilion be taken up; let thy hiding place no longer be covered; let thine ear be inclined; let thine heart be softened, and thy bowels moved with compassion toward us.

Let thine anger be kindled against our enemies; and, in the fury of thine heart, with thy sword avenge us of our wrongs.

Remember thy suffering saints, O our God; and thy servants will rejoice in thy name forever. [Doctrine and Covenants 121:1–6]

And then the Lord responds:

My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment;

And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes. [Doctrine and Covenants 121:7–8]

In his sincere petition to God, you can feel the Prophet's heart breaking with hopelessness. Joseph's anguish is evident in his cries for relief.

The Savior teaches Joseph in this experience. He turns the young Prophet's heart and mind to Him and to the eternities, offering healing, understanding, and comfort. This instructive scripture helps us understand an eternal model of extending the Savior's peace to others. He comforts, He teaches, and He promises great blessings. He lifts the vision from the here and now to the eternities and embraces the troubled with hope and love.

Perhaps we have found ourselves in our own Liberty Jail, confused, frustrated, and hopeless—our patience wearing thin as we wait for the divine intervention we seek. Perhaps our sincere petitions for the good of those we love seem to be lost or have fallen on deaf ears. We seek immediate response, but it does not come to our liking.

It is not easy, yet we can find peace when our faith overcomes our fears and doubts. Often it comes as others reach out with love and concern, their faith shoring up our own.

My study of section 121 has led me to underline where the Savior comforts, where He teaches, and the great promises that He makes. It brings me great peace to read these verses and to know that whatever we face, whatever trials are placed before us, the Lord will make it right. He may not spare us the trial, but if we are faithful, in the eternities all will be well.

A Friend Extending the Savior's Peace to Another

My first two examples showed how the Savior brings peace. This third story illustrates what we can do in our everyday interactions with others.

Several years ago, I was asked to preside over a stake conference in British Columbia. Often we will ask stake presidents to arrange visits for us while we are in their area. The stake president took me to the home of a family who had emigrated from Cuba to Canada, seeking a new start and a better life. As we visited with this couple, I asked Sister Gomez to tell me her conversion story.

Sister Gomez serenely described their circumstances as they had tried to navigate the unfamiliar waters of a new place, a different culture, employment, language barriers, and a host of other difficulties. You can imagine how scary that would be. She said that in the midst of this turmoil in their lives, she became very depressed, feeling alone and forgotten. She began to wonder if they had made a horrible mistake by leaving family, friends, and a culture where she belonged. She felt she did not belong nor would ever belong in her new surroundings.

Sister Gomez recounted the day she sat in a park watching her children; her sadness was intense. As she watched her precious children, she worried for their well-being, and a cloud of despair descended upon her. She felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to see a woman. The woman asked if she could sit down and if their children could play together. Sister Gomez agreed, and over time and several play dates they became close friends as this woman listened intently to the difficulties Sister Gomez was facing with

her family. Eventually this woman invited Sister Gomez to attend church, promising that she would find friendship and love there.

Sister Gomez accepted the invitation and was warmly welcomed. Eventually she received the missionaries and was baptized. "I have never felt as loved before," she said. "My friend was like a savior to me."

I have never met her friend, but I feel that she was a peacemaker in the truest sense. She offered peace to a very troubled soul by reaching out with a simple tap on the shoulder. Then she listened and listened and listened. With her friendship, she brought Sister Gomez peace by bringing her closer to the Savior.

Each of you may be able to identify individuals in your life who have been true peacemakers—those who have brought you closer to the Savior by caring, loving, inviting, and extending the peace that He offers you. I believe these are the peacemakers the Savior blesses. These are the peacemakers the world needs so desperately now, and they will be remembered for all eternity for making a difference.

Peacemakers Are True Followers of Jesus Christ

As we continue to reflect on the verse "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God," let's ask ourselves the question "What does it mean to be called a child of God?" From a very young age we all learn the song "I Am a Child of God."⁶ Is the Savior referring to the divine nature and spiritual potential that lies within all of us, or is the promise something more? The scriptures indicate that it is more. Being called a son or daughter of God in this context is reserved for those who are true followers of Jesus Christ. They are true disciples who understand and reflect the pure love of Christ. The promise is significant. Being a child in this context infers an inheritance. An inheritance is not just all someone *has* but in the truest sense is all someone *is*.

We often hear phrases such as "You have your mother's eyes" or "You inherited your father's hands." The attributes of our Heavenly Father and His Son are promised to those who believe on the name of the Savior (see Ether 3:14) and those who

understand, embrace, and practice certain principles. In Moroni 7:47–48 we read:

But charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him.

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure. Amen. [Emphasis added]

The promise in this verse clearly ties to the peacemaker those who feel and extend the pure love of Christ. It is the same promise to become children of God and to become like Him.

While serving in Africa, I learned of a beautiful African tradition. Children are named for someone of great importance to the family. These people are highly esteemed by the family for having wonderful qualities such as courage, generosity, and kindness. They have become part of the family lore and tradition. The child is expected to learn about their namesake and strive to emulate their namesake's life and character.

We take upon ourselves the name of Christ. We should learn of Him and do our best to emulate who He is. The person who can extend the peace the Savior offers is the person who understands the pure love of Christ. This person looks upon others as God sees them and acts accordingly. And it shall be well with them.

Dear brothers and sisters, I don't want to discourage you from your efforts to change the world. Maybe one of you will come up with an unbelievable device or a new gadget, and I admit I will be in line to have it. Perhaps you will find the cure for a disease, create a masterful work of art, or be of some other benefit to all of humanity. I encourage you to use every talent and every bit of knowledge and inspiration you have to change the world, but while you are doing that, I invite you to make a difference in the world by being true peacemakers. For these will be called the children of God. In the name of the Prince of Peace, even Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. From Latin *compati*; Oxford Lexico online dictionary, s.v. "compassion."

2. See Matthew 5:3, note a.

3. Allen P. Ross, "7. The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12)," An Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew, 17 March 2006, Bible.org, bible.org/seriespage/7-beatitudes-matthew-51-12.

4. Ken Camp, "Bible Studies for Life: Distinct in My Character," 6 January 2016, lesson for January 24 focusing on Matthew 5:1–12, Baptist Standard, baptiststandard.com/departments/bible-study/bible-studies-for-life-distinct-in-my-character; see Oxford English Dictionary online, s.v. "beatitude": "supreme blessedness."

5. Oxford English Dictionary online, s.v. "peacemaker."

6. See "I Am a Child of God," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 301.