

Pure Religion

DON R. CLARKE

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to this wonderful student body of Brigham Young University. I bring you the love of President Thomas S. Monson. He prays for you, and I hope you pray for him.

My wife, Mary Anne, and I lived in Guatemala for five years. Elder Richard G. Scott visited while we were there, and together we toured the beautiful countries of El Salvador and Panama. On a Friday evening we had a devotional in Panama. We arrived at about 6:30 p.m., and the devotional was scheduled for 7 p.m.

As we entered the building and walked down the corridor, I looked into one of the classrooms and saw a little boy on his knees praying. I felt that I was on sacred ground, and I shut the door. We then went into the chapel, and shortly thereafter the little boy entered and sat behind us. We had a wonderful devotional with Elder Scott, and as it ended, I approached the little boy. This was our conversation:

“What is your name?”

“My name is Carlos Pitti.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirteen years old.”

“Are you here with your parents?”

“No, I am here with my brother.”

“Why were you praying in the classroom?”

“I was praying that I would feel the Spirit during the devotional.”

“Did you feel the Spirit?”

As tears ran down his cheeks from his big black eyes, he said, “Yes, I did.”

I hope and pray that, like Carlos, you have prayed that you will feel the Spirit during our time together. The Holy Ghost can teach us most effectively if we have come prepared, as did my friend Carlos.

I was blessed, as you are being blessed, to attend Brigham Young University. I often reflect on my time here as a student. It was here that I started to study business, which led to my career. It was here that I was blessed with wonderful friends, class associates, professors, and Church leaders. It was here that one of my greatest blessings happened: I met my beloved Mary Anne Jackson. We dated here, we were engaged here, and we married on June 5, 1970, shortly after our graduation here.

Don R. Clarke was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given on 13 January 2015.

You may ask why we didn't get married before we graduated. The answer is that Mary Anne had promised her father not to get married until after she had graduated. Jacob waited fourteen years for Rebekah, and I waited eighteen months for Mary Anne. I would have waited fourteen years.

I am in the process of working with someone to write my personal history. One of the chapters will be "Look What She Did with Me." The best thing I ever did was marry Mary Anne Jackson. I love you, Mary Anne.

A couple of years ago a young man—let's call him John—came to my office, having shortly returned from his mission. He was a student at this university.

He said to me, with great concern, "Elder Clarke, I need help. I loved my mission. It changed me. However, I am losing some of those sacred and special feelings that I felt in the mission field. I live in an apartment of returned missionaries. We don't pray together, and we don't read the scriptures together."

He was pleading, "Can you help me?"

He asked, "What can I do to feel like I felt in the mission field?"

I have seen this happen many times. It is not just a question for returned missionaries. His question was, "What can I do to be happy, feel the Holy Ghost, and be close to the Savior?"

This is a question we all should ask every day.

On that afternoon in my office we turned to James 1:27 and read:

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

We then read in Alma 34:28:

And now behold, my beloved brethren, I say unto you, do not suppose that this is all; for after ye have done all these things, if ye turn away the needy,

and the naked, and visit not the sick and afflicted, and impart of your substance, if ye have, to those who stand in need—I say unto you, if ye do not any of these things, behold, your prayer is vain, and availeth you nothing, and ye are as hypocrites who do deny the faith.

Pure religion includes caring for the poor and the needy.

We then reviewed the story you have all heard many times in John 21, in which Peter and others had gone fishing, had caught nothing, were told by the Savior to put the net on the other side of the boat, and then had caught 153 fish. Then there was a fish fry. Then Peter and the Savior were talking. The Savior knew He was instructing the soon-to-be prophet and president of the Church for one of the last times.

You remember the question asked by the Savior: "Peter, do you love me?"

The answer was, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee" (John 21:15).

The Savior then said, "Feed my lambs."

Two more times the same question was asked, and the Savior's instruction was a little bit different: "Feed my sheep" (verses 16 and 17).

Peter was really being instructed to practice pure religion, or to care for the people. The prophet of God today, as well as long ago, cares for and loves the people. President Thomas S. Monson is a great example of one who practices pure religion. He has spent his entire life loving and caring for people!

I have seen many returned missionaries and others like my friend John, who came to my office that day. If you ask missionaries why they loved their missions, almost always they will eventually say because of their love for the people. The day a missionary starts to care more about others, they become happy. That is the way it is for all of us. Our lives will always be happier if we care for and love others.

The opposite of caring for others is always thinking about oneself—my car, my studies,

or my job. When it is always about “me,” our connection with heaven isn’t as strong as it could be.

That day in my office I told John that if he would practice pure religion, he would be happy and feel like he had felt on his mission. We went on to discuss pure religion as defined in James 1:27, Alma 34:28, and John 21.

I would give you the same advice that I discussed with my friend John that day. If you want to be happy, feel the Holy Ghost, and grow closer to the Savior, then practice pure religion.

From these scriptures we learn five key practices that can be defined as pure religion:

1. Care for and visit widows.
2. Help orphans.
3. Care for the needy and the poor.
4. Help lambs.
5. Help sheep.

Let me share some thoughts on each of these groups.

Many widows sit home every day waiting for someone to come or call. If I was a bishop at BYU, I would adopt many widows for my ward, and the calling for many would be to visit them weekly. This would be a calling with eternal significance and would have a much greater impact than a calling such as handing out hymnbooks or some other miscellaneous assignment.

John went back to BYU and acted upon what we had discussed. He sent me the following email:

Hi, Elder Clarke.

How are you? I hope all is well. It has been a while since I have written you, and I wanted to see how everything has been going. I feel you should know that I still think about our meeting last January. I felt the Spirit very strong in teaching me life’s principles that we spoke of, and doing so has continued to bless my life. Each month I have

learned different things from that conversation and our other conversations since. Visiting the widows and the elderly has been an incredible blessing. I have seen repayments of kindness many times over. I could go on, really, and fill this page with experiences. Thank you. It is truly a blessing to have a great friend.

I would like to share one experience, however, that you might enjoy. A few Sundays ago I went to an assisted-care facility for the elderly to read inspirational stories from the Ensign. The twelve or so of us began with a prayer, and I began to read to them. The Spirit over that hour entered gradually and powerfully, and the simple stories of faith turned into very powerful testimony builders. Many individuals felt a great amount of love and support from the Savior as the Spirit testified of simple truths and testimonies.

It touched my soul to be able to be an instrument for the Lord, because I definitely felt His love for those sweet people. As I was on my way out, a few commented that they wanted to adopt me! I had never known I was capable of feeling such love from and for strangers with whom I had little connection. But I felt the Savior’s love for them, for those kind souls. It appeared clear to me that I would meet these individuals—now riddled by dementia, Alzheimer’s, and physical ailments—on the other side. I would see their husbands and wives, who have been looking over them from the other side of the veil. I felt very much the presence of my grandfather—whom I had never met—as I sat with my grandmother, and his spirit strengthened me and supported me. I knew he was thankful for my simple visit.

Who knew that I could find such tender mercies? It seems so meaningless to come home after something like that and just turn on the TV or tune out in some other way. It has changed me to realize that these tender experiences are available at all moments of the day as we, as Saints, strive to focus and help others in some way.

As I left that room that day, all of the elderly wished for my prompt return. They had bright smiles and warm hearts. They were thankful.

In the hallway, your words echoed in my heart: “They will do more for you than you will ever be able to do for them.” What a blessing true service is!

Just before Christmas I was invited to a rest home, where I also had the opportunity to visit many widows. I felt the same way that John felt. You can do this too, and the Lord will bless you as He blessed John and me.

Orphans may be hard to find here in Provo, but there are many throughout the world. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could connect with or write one regularly? Big Brothers and Big Sisters is a way to connect with those who need a mentor.

When our son, Nate, returned home from his mission, he had the same feelings as my friend John. Nate decided to become a Big Brother, and that experience changed his college experience. Nate chose to create an experience in which he had the opportunity to think about someone beside himself. Now that he is married, Nate and his wife, Carla, have adopted again through Big Brothers and Big Sisters. It has been a great blessing for them in their marriage to share what they have with those in need.

When Mary Anne and I served in the Bolivia Santa Cruz Mission, we had a missionary who was an orphan boy. He had no family. The Lord assigned him to be Elder Hawkins' trainer. I don't think he was the best trainer, but Elder Hawkins was the best companion for an orphan boy who had become one of the Lord's missionaries. Elder Hawkins' parents adopted this missionary and wrote to him during his mission and have continued to write to him for the past fifteen years. This orphan has become part of Elder Hawkins' family for all these years! This orphan boy, because of Elder Hawkins and his family, has been loved and cared for and is now happily married, employed, and active in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We all can help change little orphan boys!

As we review the scriptures, we are constantly reminded of the importance of helping the poor and the needy. At our last general conference, Elder Holland's talk was entitled, "Are We Not All Beggars?" This talk is an excellent reminder of our responsibility to help the poor and the needy. We should review it regularly. One way that we could increase our help to the poor and the needy would be to pay a generous fast offering.

Brigham Young said:

The first year that I came into this valley I had not flour enough to last my family until harvest . . . , and persons were coming to my house every day for bread. I had the blues about [it] one day; I went down to the old fort, and by the time I got back to my house I was completely cured. I said to my wife, “Do not let a person come here for food and go away empty handed, for if you do we shall suffer before harvest; but if you give to every individual that comes we shall have enough to last us through.” . . .

I intend to keep doing so, that my bread may hold out, for if I do not I shall come short.

Do you believe that principle? I know it is true, because I have proven it so many times.
[JD 3:332–33]

The following experience was posted on a Christian website by a Hospice of Metro Denver physician:

I just had one of the most amazing experiences of my life and wanted to share it with my family and dearest friends: I was driving home from a meeting this evening about five, stuck in traffic on Colorado Boulevard, and the car started to choke and splutter and die. I barely managed to coast . . . into a gas station, glad only that I would not be blocking traffic and would have a somewhat warm spot to wait for the tow truck. It wouldn't even turn over.

Before I could make the call, I saw a woman walking out of the “quickie mart” building, and

it looked like she slipped on some ice and fell into a gas pump, so I got out to see if she was okay. When I got there, it looked more like she had been overcome by sobs than that she had fallen; she was a young woman who looked really haggard with dark circles under her eyes. She dropped something as I helped her up, and I picked it up to give it to her. It was a nickel.

At that moment, everything came into focus for me: the crying woman, the ancient Suburban crammed full of stuff with three kids in the back (one in a car seat), and the gas pump reading \$4.95. I asked her if she was okay and if she needed help, and she just kept saying, "I don't want my kids to see me crying," so we stood on the other side of the pump from her car. She said she was driving to California and that things were very hard for her right now.

So I asked, "And you were praying?" That made her back away from me a little, but I assured her I was not a crazy person and said, "He heard you, and He sent me."

I took out my card and swiped it through the card reader on the pump so she could fill up her car completely and while it was fueling walked to the next-door McDonald's and bought two big bags of food, some gift certificates for more, and a big cup of coffee. She gave the food to the kids in the car, who attacked it like wolves, and we stood by the pump eating fries and talking a little. She told me her name and that she lived in Kansas City.

Her boyfriend had left two months ago, and she had not been able to make ends meet. She knew she wouldn't have money to pay rent on January 1, and, finally, in desperation had called her parents, with whom she had not spoken in about five years. They lived in California and said she could come live with them and try to get on her feet there. So she packed up everything she owned in the car. She told the kids they were going to California for Christmas, but not that they were going to live there.

I gave her my gloves and a little hug and said a quick prayer with her for safety on the road. As I was walking over to my car, she said, "So, are you like an angel or something?"

This definitely made me cry. I said, "Sweetie, at this time of year angels are really busy, so sometimes God uses regular people."

It was so incredible to be a part of someone else's miracle. And, of course, you guessed it, when I got in my car, it started right away and got me home with no problem. I'll put it in the shop tomorrow to check, but I suspect the mechanic won't find anything wrong.

Sometimes the angels fly close enough to you that you can hear the flutter of their wings. ["Friends Are God's Way of Taking Care of Us," lisburn.com/stories/friends_are_gods_way.html]

Does the Lord trust us to be an answer to someone else's prayer? Can He count on us to follow the promptings of the Spirit? The more we follow the Spirit's promptings, the more opportunities the Lord will present to us to be the answer to someone else's prayer.

Not long ago, when President Monson addressed the General Authorities, his one subject was the youth. The youth have many temptations like you do. The young lambs are in need of nourishment.

When Jesus had His conversation with Peter, it is interesting that His first counsel to Peter was, "Feed my lambs." The Savior knew that if we keep the lambs, we won't have to look for lost sheep. Some of us may have younger brothers or sisters, nephews, nieces, or other young people we know who need help. May we be great examples for them and may we find the lambs who need our help.

I meet with young people everywhere. When I ask them who has helped them, many talk about individuals like you. Will you find and help a lamb?

We recently went to see the *Savior of the World* production at the LDS Conference Center. In this presentation of the birth of the Savior it was emphasized that the lowly shepherds were the people the Lord trusted to share the message that the Savior had been

born. The shepherds were dependable and trustworthy, and the Lord knew that He could count on them to proclaim the important message. Are we as shepherds trustworthy enough to care for the lambs and the sheep as the Savior has asked us to do?

Some time ago one of our daughters was assigned to speak on Christmas Sunday. The topic was “How can we become shepherds this Christmas season?” Let me quote from her talk:

The highlight of Christmas at the Clarkes was always Christmas Eve. The day was spent baking, cooking, wrapping, and busily getting everything ready for the evening ahead. We would bundle up in our hats and gloves and head to God’s Acre, the square in the center of town with a different denomination of church on each of the four corners. The town band would play Christmas carols, and people of all faiths would gather and sing together. All were there for the same purpose: to celebrate the birth of our Savior. But this was just the beginning of the evening.

After caroling, we would head back home, where the feast we had been working on all day would quickly come together for all to enjoy. The month before, my parents would begin asking around the ward to find out who did not have somewhere to go for Christmas Eve. Whoever they might be, they were always invited to our home for the festivities. We lived on the East Coast, far from our relatives, so my parents decided we would be family to those around us, and they would be family for us.

One year when my older siblings were at college and heading home for the holidays, it was mentioned that maybe Christmas Eve would be just for our family this year.

When Christie arrived home from BYU, she asked Mom, “Who is coming for Christmas Eve?”

My mother commented that this year we were going to have just our family because three of our siblings had been away.

Christie then said, “But Mom, what will our Iranian friends do? What will the Toomeys do? And what will Rune do for Christmas Eve?”

These people were counting on us, and we couldn’t change our tradition. Christie had felt the wondrous blessings of having these special sheep in our home for Christmas, and it meant everything to her!

The feast would always be for at least forty or so. In addition to the families that were invited, my parents always invited the local zone of missionaries to our home for Christmas Eve. After dinner we would move to the living room for the Christmas program.

The evening was centered on the true meaning of Christmas: celebrating the birth of our Savior. My dad would read the Christmas story from Luke, and then we would go around the room with everyone having the opportunity to share their testimony of Jesus Christ. At the end of the evening everyone received a gift.

In this story—the story of the Christmas Eves of my childhood—the shepherds are my parents. They opened up their home to those who had nowhere else to go. These people were family and were treated as such.

We have all been touched by shepherds in our lives, and we have all been shepherds at times. But at this holiday season I hope we can all try to be as the shepherds of Bethlehem and proclaim the birth of our Savior—not only through our words but also through our actions, by inviting all into the fold.

We just passed the Christmas season—and Bill Toomey was in our home once again. This is a time of the year when we tend to practice pure religion. There is a country song called “I Wish It Was Christmas All Year Long.” Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could keep that special Christmas spirit all year round?

The question asked by the Savior of Peter could be asked of each of us: “Do you love me?” As we practice pure religion by caring for and visiting widows, helping orphans, caring for the poor and the needy, and helping lambs and sheep, we will show Him that we love Him! As we do this, we will be happy, feel the Holy Ghost, and feel closer to the Savior.

I would like to bear my testimony to you, my young friends, that as we practice pure religion, we make a connection with heaven that is made in no other way. I testify to you that this is the true Church of Jesus Christ upon the earth today. I know that Thomas S. Monson is God's prophet. I have watched, I have listened, I have felt, and I know.

I know that Joseph Smith saw the Father and the Son. There was one October day when I was in the Sacred Grove alone. No one else was there. Just me. I knelt and I prayed. I know that the Father and the Son came to Joseph Smith. I love Joseph Smith.

But that which is most sacred to me is my testimony of Jesus Christ. In Alma 7:7 it says that there will be many things that will come to pass, and then it says, "There is one thing which is of more importance than they all." It goes on to talk about the life and birth and atonement of Jesus Christ. I testify that that which is most important of them all is Jesus Christ. I love Him. I am thankful that He has given me the opportunity to serve Him. May we follow Him and do as He has asked us to do. This is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.