

# *Blessings Through the Law*

JOHN K. EDMUNDS

President Oaks, members of the faculty, members of the student body, friends and guests, it is a high honor to be invited by the President of your University to address a group such as this, and I am highly concerned with it. I don't think that I have ever faced a visible audience larger than this, but I have faced in my imagination many audiences of various sizes over television and radio.

My first experience speaking before a student body of Brigham Young University was given to me at the invitation of Dr. Ernest Wilkinson, a friend whom I had long admired and been associated with, about seventeen years ago. At that time I talked on the subject of law and entitled the speech "Joseph Smith and the Rule of Probabilities." As is the case today, on that occasion I had quite a group—almost a hand-picked group—of relatives and friends who were there to hear me. They assured me that it was a good talk. But, when I consider the fact that it has taken me seventeen years to get a second invitation, I'll have to appraise that first effort with a good deal of modesty.

Today, again, I would like to discuss with you the law—this time, not the law that is made by legislatures, but the higher law, which

I conceive of as law that has been discovered rather than made—law that is quite different in some respects from the laws of men and in other respects may coincide with it. The laws of men come and go; they are fleeting. They change with the going and the coming of legislators. The statute books of our states are filled with laws—some of them good, some of them bad, some of them useless, some of them useful but not founded in fact or upon reality. An example of these last-mentioned laws is the presumption of law that if a man disappears and is absent from his family for a period—usually a period of seven years—and if his family, after making contacts with those who would most likely know of his existence if he were still alive, has no evidence to bear out the fact that he is alive, then the law presumes him to be dead. This may be a reality; it may not be a reality. One of the English jurists, Lord Darling, commented on this law in these words: "If a man stay away from his wife for seven years, the law presumes the separation

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*John K. Edmunds was serving as president of the Salt Lake Temple when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 26 February 1974.*

to have killed him; yet according to our daily experience, it might well prolong his life.”

The law that I shall speak of today is the law that is eternal, unchangeable, universal, everlastingly true, founded in reason and in fact—law that does not change with changes in the attitudes of people. We must conform our attitudes to this law; the law will not conform to our attitudes. I think of the laws of God in the same sense in which I think of the laws of nature, the laws of gravitation, the laws of motion, the laws of chemical combination. They are there everlastingly, discovered by God, revealed to man by him as we are prepared to receive them. I am going to borrow a definition of law for the purpose of this talk from the distinguished French writer André Maurois. He said, “Laws are the necessary relations which follow from the nature of things.” When man comes to realize that true laws are the necessary relations that follow from the nature of things and are not made or created but are discovered, then he begins to understand that his blessings, as well as his misfortunes, are the necessary results of his obedience to or violation of law.

### **The Law of Health**

With this definition in mind, let us turn to an analysis of some of the principles of the gospel. We’ll take as our first example a very simple one—the law of health that is known as the Word of Wisdom. Incidentally, we will commemorate the 141st anniversary of the giving of that law tomorrow. The Lord, in the prohibitions referred to in that law, said this: “Inasmuch as any man drinketh wine or strong drink among you, behold it is not good. . . . Strong drinks are not for the belly, but for the washing of your bodies” (D&C 89:5, 7). Parenthetically, I think he referred to an external washing. “And again, tobacco is not for the body, neither for the belly, and is not good for man” (D&C 89:8).

Let me ask you a question. Do you suppose that the day before this law was given or revealed, ten days before it, ten years before it, a millennium before it, tobacco was good for man and good for the belly, which includes the whole abdominal cavity from the breast to the thighs? Do you suppose that it was good for man and that the giving of the law, ipso facto, made it bad? Why, the answer to that is so obvious that the question is an idle one. There is something about the nature of the body of man and of nicotine, which is in the tobacco, that when nicotine is taken or absorbed into the body it sets up some harmful relations that are necessary results of the relationship between them. The illnesses, the ailments, that have been charged by individual scientists and individual physicians to the use of tobacco are so numerous that to enumerate them in ordinary type would give us a list as long as the arm. I have made a note of forty-four of these illnesses, and I am going to refer to just a few of them here: duodenal ulcer; liver hemorrhages; kidney degeneration; heightened blood pressure; degeneration of the heart muscle; heart block; Bright’s disease, which is a degeneration of the kidneys and the imperfect elimination of uric acid; tobacco epilepsy; cancer of the mouth and throat; premature senility; apoplexy.

I wouldn’t have you believe, nor would I advise you that the medical profession as a whole or that scientists as a whole would accept, the thesis that all of these ailments are chargeable to tobacco, that they are all the direct, proximate result of the absorption of nicotine. They wouldn’t even agree that some of these ailments are in a contributive way the responsibility of tobacco. But the case against tobacco is so well proved that, if it weren’t for the profit element in its production and sale, there would undoubtedly be a national law against its use. A national law against its use might not accomplish very much either, because it takes men a long time to accept law.

It takes them a long time to learn. There are men too dull to learn that our blessings or our misfortunes are the result of obedience or disobedience. An English author, Sir Thomas Pope Blount, has said that “some will never learn anything because they understand everything too soon.” And that’s the case with many men.

### **The Laws of Repentance and Baptism**

I cannot and do not pretend to be able to point to the fundamental, basic, eternal principles involved in all of the commandments of the Lord. I have no trouble with the principle of repentance. The recognition of mistakes, the sorrow or regret for them, the resolution to proceed in a new and better course, and the actual proceeding in that course comprise repentance. I have no difficulty in seeing that it is a fundamental, eternal principle of progression. But when it comes to baptism, in the words of Paul, “[I] see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). I see all the symbolism attached to it: the likeness of it to a birth, the likeness of it to a death, the likeness to the death and the burial and the resurrection of the Master. Just as he came forth from that stony tomb, each of us comes froth from the watery grave to a newness of life, putting away the old life and living a new and better one. I can understand all of these things, but they do not explain to me the great importance that God has placed upon baptism. The Master said that, without it, no man could enter into the kingdom of God (see John 3:5). Perhaps it is a matter of obedience. Perhaps it is a matter even more significant than that. When men make covenants and contracts with one another, it is common practice to reduce them to writing so that they may have a witness of the nature of the covenant and of the making of the covenant. Perhaps baptism serves the Lord’s purpose as a witness of the making of covenants on the part of his children. Alma so expressed his opinion when he, having fled from those

who were about to destroy him among the followers of King Noah, went to the place that was called Mormon. Here his disciples began coming to him in secret and by night for fear of the persecution that would involve them if they came in the daytime. Alma said these significant words to them:

*Behold, here are the waters of Mormon, . . . now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light;*

*Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death. . . .*

*Now I say unto you, if this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments? [Mosiah 18:8–10]*

Perhaps that is the principle, the everlasting principle, that underlies the ordinance of baptism. It is our witness to God that we are willing to serve and obey him.

### **The Covenant of the Higher Priesthood**

When we make covenants with God, usually they are not unilateral covenants, for God makes reciprocal covenants with us. His covenants may be implied or expressed. As a good example of an express covenant, I refer you to the covenant that is made when you receive the priesthood—the higher priesthood. Man covenants with God to magnify that priesthood, to live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. And God makes covenants with him. These reciprocal covenants are set out in the 84th section of the Doctrine and Covenants. They are comprehended in that final statement of his covenant, as follows: “All that my Father hath shall be given unto him” (D&C 84:38).

That is an express covenant; God promises to give to us all that he has, provided we honor our covenants. What God gives to us, however, he gives to us through obedience to law.

A story might be interjected here. I have a brother sitting here before me who has served you for many years as a doctor in the McDonald Student Health Center. He has been a very, very liberal brother in the benefactions he has given to the family. For years he sent us Christmas gifts the like of which we could not reciprocate. One year when Sister Edmunds and I felt that we had a few extra dollars, we decided to make a present to him and his wife, a Christmas present that would be somewhat commensurate with what they had been doing for us. We went to one of the large stores in the Chicago Loop, one of the very prominent stores in the Midwest, and selected a beautiful set of china plates that were to cost us quite a sum of money. As I took out the check and began to fill it in, I said to the clerk, "I don't want this sent out now." It was then the middle of November, and I didn't want the gift to appear as an invitation to my brother to go the extra mile and outdo me. So I said to the clerk, "I want you to hold this until the middle of December and then ship it."

She said, "It is against the policy of the store to do that. If you pay for merchandise fully, we must send it out within a reasonable time. But you can do this: you can make a small payment on account and then, when you want the merchandise sent out, you can come into the store, pay the balance, and we'll be glad to ship it." We made a small payment and left.

About the middle of December I said to Sister Edmunds, "Don't you think it's about time we had that gift sent to Paul and Ella?" She agreed that it was and said she would go in and make the payment and order its shipment. During the afternoon, a few minutes after she had entered the store, I received a distress call at my office from my wife. She said, "Something terrible has happened. I came into

this store and I spoke to one of the clerks and told her that I had come to make the balance payment on a gift we had ordered and to have it shipped to Utah. The clerk left me for a few minutes, came back, and then told me that the gift had been sent. I told her I didn't see how it could have been because we hadn't paid for it. She said, 'Well, it was sent COD.'" What followed that in the telephone conversation is best described by my wife. She said, "When I told you that, there was a dead silence. I know that you are not a swearing man." (This is her story; I am not admitting to anything.) "But you broke the silence of the telephone by saying, 'Did you ever hear of anything so damned dumb?'" After saying that, embarrassment crowded in upon my mind, and I immediately wrote a letter of apology to my brother and sent him the money that he had had to pay to take the gift out of the mail.

In due course, I received a response from him which was very interesting. He said, "We could hardly believe, John, that you were sending us a Christmas gift COD. But we entered into the spirit of the thing and we took it out. We called in our friends and showed them this beautiful gift and told them how we had received it. Our friends and neighbors have come to the conclusion that it was a very smart idea. They're all for bigger and better Christmas gifts. And we're already planning on what we will send you for Christmas next year."

As I contemplated what I might receive the next year, I thought to myself, "Well, I have to be a good sport. I'll have to take it—whether it's a wheelchair or an elephant." Then I thought to myself, "There are some gifts he could send me that I wouldn't mind paying for COD." Then the thought came to me, "Why, aren't all of our blessings sent to us in that same manner? Does not God give us our blessings COD?"

### **Many Blessings Predicated on Future Obedience**

“There is a law, irrevocably decreed,” the Lord said, “. . . upon which all blessings are predicated—And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:20–21). Isn’t this in a sense a COD blessing? I think it is. The greatest blessing our Heavenly Father can give us, he said, is the blessing of eternal life (see D&C 14:7). He can’t give us that as one would give a birthday present; that’s something he can only give us COD. We pay the price and we receive the blessing.

We have all made successful starts toward eternal life. Eternal life is more than just living forever, more than immortality. Eternal life is to live a life like unto our Eternal Father’s, to have the privilege and power and knowledge to become creators, to organize and form earths, to people worlds, to become heavenly fathers and heavenly mothers ourselves. We have taken the first step toward that in keeping our preexistent estate so that we might come to earth and have bodies.

We also have other tests, and there are other steps that must be taken. We must live according to the light and truth that have come into our lives—the light and truth that we have received or have had the opportunity to receive, had we reached for them. We must enter into the covenant of baptism. We must accept and enter into the covenant of baptism. We must accept and enter into the covenant of the holy priesthood. We must receive our endowments in the holy temples of God. We must enter into the covenant of eternal marriage in that holy place. I have seen so many couples who come into the Salt Lake Temple for marriage, coming in groups, day after day. In one month alone, the month of August 1973, we had 1,113 couples come to that temple to receive this sacred ordinance, which is required for eternal life. As I performed some of these marriages, I said to these couples, “We can give

you the ordinance, but we can’t give you eternal marriage. That is your decision; that is your job. That you must earn. You must endure in righteousness to the end. You have nothing made by simply coming here. Nothing is ever made that you do not make yourself. You will have to continue in righteousness to the end of your lives, living ‘by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.’ ”

When I think of eternal life, the thought is beyond my comprehension. Whenever I consider the words that were phrased by Lorenzo Snow, “As man is, God once was; as God is, man may be,” there seems to loom up before me an unclimbable mountain. Then I begin to take comfort in some of the thoughts that I have heard. One of them was expressed by Nicholas Murray Butler: “When the plains rise, the mountains look small.” I don’t know that this mountain of godhood that we call “eternal life” will ever look small, but I believe that it is climbable. I believe it will take all the faith, all the desire, all the will, all the strength, all the potential that I have as a son of God to climb that mountain, but I believe it is climbable because God said it was. He revealed it to the Prophet Joseph and Sidney Rigdon in a great vision and revelation in the year 1832 (see D&C 76). And he has said of his revelations, “What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled” (D&C 1:38).

### **God’s Laws Designed to Make Us Perfect**

The Savior gave to us a tremendous challenge. The challenge was this: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). This is the purpose of the law—the perfection of mankind. Unlike the laws of man, which often do not lead to any perfection, the laws of God were designed and revealed for our perfection. The laws of men are sometimes revealed for our restraint and for our control, and so on. They may be

successful or unsuccessful. One satirical writer has said of the laws of men, "The law can make you quit drinking [which I doubt], but the law can't make you quit being the kind that needs a law to make you quit drinking" (Donald Robert Perry Marquis). That's the case with the laws of men. The laws of God have a great persuasion, and accompanied by the Spirit of God they can lead man on to perfection.

We know the way, we know the reward, and we know the cost that we must pay. The question for each of us to answer is this: Will we abide the law? Will we pay the cost? God cannot give to man that which man is not willing and prepared to receive. Through his love and mercy he reveals the law, but he can't give to man eternal life unless man will prepare himself through obedience to the law to receive eternal life. Laws are the necessary relations which follow from the nature of things. God has said that "he who is not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory. And he who cannot abide the law of a terrestrial kingdom cannot abide a terrestrial glory" (D&C 88:22–23). There is something about the nature of man that, when he abides the celestial law, he produces a celestial body. When he abides the terrestrial law, he produces a terrestrial body. There is no chance and there is no accident in this. It follows as a necessary relation of his obedience to law.

My brothers and my sisters, young and old, this is within your reach. This is within your

power. And I want to say to you that, when eternal life is at stake, no man can afford indifference. And eternal life *is* at stake.

I heard a story told by a doctor in Salt Lake many years ago. He said that he had left his home one night to make a house call. A patient called while he was away, and his young daughter answered the phone. She told him that the doctor wasn't there. The patient said, "This is an emergency. I must be able to reach him. Where is he?"

She replied, "I don't know, but he said he was going out on an eternity case."

Each of our lives, day after day, is an eternity case with us. Where will you spend your postmortal life? Will you spend it with a family? Will you have a wife? Will you have your children in the life hereafter? You may say, as many of our people say, "Nobody can take my wife away and nobody can take my children away from me." President Brigham Young said, "The right to say 'This is my wife and these are my children' depends upon your obedience to the commandments of God."

Yes, laws are the necessary relations which follow from the nature of things. Choose well the law and make your choice for eternity. When eternal life is the stake, you cannot afford indifference. I bear witness to these truths in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.