

Christmas Lessons

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I am very honored to be traveling today with Elder Kikuchi, who is at Church headquarters, becoming better acquainted with his work across the world before he returns to his home and family in Tokyo and to whatever assignment he will then receive. He is a wonderful, choice, special servant of the Lord, and it will be a happy day when you get to know him a little better and feel the warmth and strength of his spirit. We are honored that he would come with us today as part of his introduction to the big frightening world of being a General Authority.

I had you in mind a week ago today as I spoke to a group of professional Scouters in New Orleans. I repeated for them a conversation I had read between an interviewer and one of the professional hockey players for the Detroit Red Wings. The interviewer's question was, "Are those hockey fights we see fake?"

The answer was, "If they were fake, you would see me in a lot more of them."

I thought of you in this way: If a lot of the meetings we held were fake, or if the purposes for them were fake, you would see me in a lot fewer of them. I just returned a few hours ago from Guatemala, where I spent the last four days, and I bring you greetings. You may have come from there or have been there or may be

on your way there. The people there are waiting for you. The Church is growing, the spirit of the people is wonderful, and the leadership excellent—all portends a marvelous future for many of the choice children of God.

Some things haven't changed. The airplane left three hours late. There is still a little bit of a quiet attitude toward time in Latin America, but there is no lack of spirit or lack of love or lack of fine work going on.

The magnificent music introducing this devotional today is a proper setting for the theme I want to talk about. It would seem to some that such music might be seasonally confined. I'm grateful it's not, because my theme may be thought similarly incapacitated. But I don't think so.

Let me begin by quoting some lines from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Brutus and Cassius and associates have killed Caesar. Mark Antony's oration has been completed and his concluding remark made: "Now let it work" (act 3, scene 2, line 260). He had set the

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mischief afoot that in his mind would avenge Caesar's death.

You know well, I suppose, the sequence of events: The battle is waged between Octavius, Caesar, and Antony on one side and Cassius and Brutus and their armies on the other. Cassius is misled into thinking that the battle is lost and takes his own life. Brutus, coming on the scene from the battle, where he had actually been prevailing over the armies of Octavius, sees Cassius dead and says:

*Friends, I owe more tears
To this dead man than you shall see me pay.
I shall find time, Cassius, I shall find time.*
[Act 5, scene 3, lines 101–3]

We've just been through a season celebrating the birth, the life, and the mission of another more important King who was also slain by conspirators. Have we ourselves found the time to shed tears in contemplation of Him and His life and love and gift?

I've been wondering what the season may have brought to you, what happened to you, and if anything very special occurred. I wonder what you may have learned or renewed or intensified of conviction.

I thought I might share the experience I had this past Christmas because, while it involved much that was old and warm and wonderful and comfortable and traditional, it also brought some new and real and lovely and tearful and wonderful times.

I was reminded this Christmas of the three basic relationships that have to be right for life to be good and for our contributions to be adequate for what the Lord expects of us. Those three relationships were specifically taught by the Lord Himself. His first commandment was to love God with everything we have—heart, might, mind, and strength. The second commandment like unto it invites us to love our neighbor as ourselves. On these two laws—these two commandments, these

two principles of eternal validity—all else rests, all else hangs (see Matthew 22:37–40).

Paul knew that. Paul was trying to teach these principles of love to Timothy, his young brother—just as I testify to you young brethren and sisters today—when he wrote these words: “The end of the commandment [as I understand it, the consequence of obeying God's commandments] is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned” (1 Timothy 1:5). Rearrange those just a little and you'll see that he is saying exactly what the Lord taught us: faith in God and charity out of a pure heart for our fellowmen and out of a good conscience will produce the pure heart or spring from it. These are the basics, these are the relationships, these are the indispensables of love. Let me talk a little of this if I may.

What of the first relationship of love, our responsibility and the possibility of loving ourselves? We know ourselves so well, you and I, that we find that commandment difficult to really comprehend and accept as it is invited to our attention. Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself. Well, to begin to love ourselves, we must know that God loves us and that we are His. There are mentioned in the 26th chapter of 2 Nephi the basic commandments taught to Moses on Mount Sinai and the account of their having been broken by the people. Then there are these words:

For none of these iniquities come of the Lord; for he doeth that which is good among the children of men; and he doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men; and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile. [2 Nephi 26:33]

The meaning seems plain. God really does love His children, even His disobedient children.

I once sat across the desk from a beautiful young lady whose story I do not wish to repeat here in any detail. I will simply say that her life had been very seriously damaged by sin and sorrow of a major kind. She had given up, surrendered, cut herself off from her future, and thought there was nothing at all left for her here or hereafter; and yet, she was living. Again, the details of the story would enhance the impression of her despair, but I will give you only the end. We had talked for a long time. I had tried the best I could by referring to the Bible, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Book of Mormon to teach her the principle of repentance and to talk of God's love for her. I had read the verse I have just read to you and knew that I was not reaching her, that the interview was about over, and that she would pass on to the same terror and tragedy she then had in her heart. She had no hope, no future, no real belief that God would ever have anything more to do with her. Then I read some words from 2 Nephi, chapter 10, to which I invite your prayerful attention:

Seeing that our merciful God has given us so great knowledge concerning these things, let us remember him, and lay aside our sins, and not hang down our heads, for we are not cast off. [2 Nephi 10:20]

We read another line from this marvelous book, which we are learning over the years to begin to appreciate. This excerpt from the last communication between a great father and a choice son expresses the father's deepest, sweetest, and warmest convictions about Christ:

My son, be faithful in Christ; and may not the things which I have written grieve thee, to weigh thee down unto death; but may Christ lift thee up, and may his sufferings and death, and the showing his body unto our fathers, and his mercy and long-suffering, and the hope of his glory and of eternal life, rest in your mind forever. [Moroni 9:25]

Let not the things, the message, the mission, the gift of Christ weigh you down and grieve you, but may He lift you up and make you aware of all the warm, wonderful blessings available to you. Let them rest in your mind.

After reading this scripture to the young woman, I saw curtains part that had been closed tight. Tears came to her eyes, her heart opened, conviction entered, and repentance poured out as she began to understand the power of forgiveness. I wish every person in the world could have heard her words, because at some point everyone needs to hear them. She said, "I know I will still be lonely sometimes, but I will never feel alone again." Sure, you'll be lonely too sometimes, but you need never feel alone. God does love His children.

Just this weekend I read in a book—to which I hope to make brief reference before I'm through—a statement about life's injustices. I thought of the Apostle Paul, a very brilliant man, who knew quite a lot of this world's injustices. He knew its imponderables, he knew its miseries and inequities, and he knew its inhumanity. Yet it was Paul, with that background and knowledge and experience, who said to the Romans:

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:

And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ. [Romans 8:16–17]

He also said we are the offspring of God, and he said much more. Well, Paul knew problems enough and ultimately lost his own life in the cause of the Lord. But Paul knew what each of us must know: that God is our Father and really loves us. And so, because we know who we are and care about what happens to us, we can love ourselves. The love we are commanded to have for ourselves, the self-esteem we must have to be happy, is not and cannot be based on perfection. It comes as we realize who we are and to whom we

belong as we recognize our limitations, our sins, our ignorance, and our need for His love and mercy; as we learn His word and feel His spirit and understand His fatherhood and His loving-kindness; and as we keep His commandments. Then we may make the transition. Then we can love ourselves—not in the arrogance God could not brook or in the pride He commands against, but in a sense of self-reverence and self-knowledge, because we know to whom we belong. With that esteem for ourselves, that love, then we can reach out to our neighbor. Only then can we really love our neighbor, I believe. There will be no confusion, and we will not condition our love for him on his perfection. We will love him because we know who he is and care about the quality of his eternal experience. We'll strip off the facade, the veneer—that “muddy vesture of decay” the bard spoke of—and see each other at heart level and do what we can to qualify as a neighbor to our neighbor (Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 5, scene 1, line 64).

The Lord knew our need to have an attitude toward and relationships with others that are good and wholesome. I love what He said to the scribes and Pharisees, and I suspect you are acquainted with His words. We know that we must keep all, even the smallest commandment, but He Himself qualified some things as weightier than others:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin [herbs and plants of the time], and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith. [Matthew 23:23]

These he interpreted at a length to which I cannot go today, but I call your attention to something Christmas reinforced for me. I have thought over the years that *judgment* may have meant *justice*, that we must be just and merciful and confident in God and just and merciful and confident with each other. But I began to

think during Christmastime about the way we live, the thoughts we invite or make welcome, our personal choices, our priorities, our loyalties, our loves, and the use of our time. And it occurred to me that He is talking about judgment—good judgment, quiet judgment, slow judgment, compassionate judgment, righteous judgment, fair judgment, merciful judgment. The scriptures give us many examples. But I offer this suggestion: He expects us not to judge each other—for we are told with what judgment we judge so shall we be judged—but in our judgments to be all those things He would wish us to be to our brother.

What of mercy? This is the subject of a wonderful consideration. I offer you only the great example that has touched my heart and my mind all my life: the example of the man left at the wayside beaten by robbers. This man was passed by some who might be thought willing to help and was helped by one who was not ethnically acceptable to the Jews. The Samaritan stopped to help, did all that could ever be expected, and much more. And the Savior ended that marvelous story by asking which of these travelers you would say was neighbor to that man. The answer: “He that shewed mercy on him” (Luke 10:37). Mercy was interpreted by the Lord to mean a sense of relationship, response, compassion, benevolence, graciousness, and neighborliness to our brother, whoever he is, whatever his need.

Oh, we love at our house at Christmas that marvelous 25th chapter of Matthew, which talks about the hungry and the thirsty and the naked, about he who is homeless and they who may be in prison or ill, and about the blessings given to those who help such people. The Lord interpreted mercy as He interpreted love. Well, to finish this brief discussion of our relationship with others, note that the apostle and the Lord talked of faith, that confidence that we have in our Father and in His Son.

I have the feeling that I have mentioned this story here before, and there may be some of

you who remember it. If so, it will be better for you. This is another story of which I may share only the headline. It is the story of a beautiful soul in a misshapen body. Her children may be here; conceivably she may be as well. She lives in this vicinity. I will only tell you that my wife and I came across her as she received an award for helping the handicapped. She who from the moment of her birth had suffered such a serious lack of normal blessings physically, she with the great heart, the great spirit, the great soul—she received the award given to one who had helped the handicapped.

In accepting the award, she recalled the day when she'd run home from school crying because thoughtless, careless children had called her hunchback, froggy, and other names. Her great father had held her in his arms and then rocked her on his knee and wept with her. He told her the importance of this day in her whole life, saying to her, "Elaine, today you decide: your life can be all that God intends it to be. The boys and girls, when they called you those names, were in a sense telling the truth. You do have a hump on your back, and you have other problems that have made your life miserable physically. But Elaine, Heavenly Father knew that as you were forming in your mother, and He sent a beautiful, special spirit, one that could handle the problems this little body would have to handle. What was said about you is in a sense true, but it wasn't fair; it wasn't kind. If all your life you will be more fair and more kind to others than a few of them will sometimes be to you, then you'll have a happy, warm, full, fruitful life like God intended."

And at that awards ceremony, that beautiful little soul who stood there with an oxygen tank behind her attached to her nostrils, who had to be helped to the platform from the hospital where she had been, bore her testimony of humanity and of her love for God and her fellowman. She said, "The only real justification I have for receiving this award is that I can say

to you in honesty that all my life I have tried to be more fair and more kind to others than a few of them have sometimes been to me."

Well, I want to spend a few minutes bearing testimony of this third relationship I thought about at Christmas: this relationship we have with God.

Christ started with the commandment to love God and then added that you should love your neighbor as yourself. But we get a feeling that the sequence isn't all that clear. If we cannot regard ourselves with esteem and respect, lacking the perfections we do but knowing who we are and that we really care and are making an effort, then the chances of our reaching out to a neighbor, who is also imperfect, seem small, and then the chances of our reaching out to the God who made us all and loves us all may be small. They all go together.

I read this week on the airplane a book, which I have in my hands, by Loren Eiseley. It's his autobiography. I could use words like *eminent* and *brilliant* and *great* and all the rest to describe him, but I'll only say that he is an anthropologist, a naturalist, and a writer. He is also an evolutionist, one who believes sincerely in the theories of organic evolution that men have developed. And as one of the most wise and sensitive among men in his profession, he is a good and strong witness.

I've come today not to discuss theories of evolution but to share just one theme that runs throughout Loren Eiseley's book and then concludes it. I plead with you to listen. It may save your life to listen.

I have come to believe that in the world there is nothing to explain the world. Nothing in nature that can separate the existent from the potential. . . . Biological scientists, however, are involved by necessity in the explanation of life. In the end many are forced into metaphysical positions which reflect their own temperamental bent. [Loren Eiseley, *All the Strange Hours: The Excavation of a Life* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 245–46]

I read only a few sentences and intend only to extract from those few sentences their implication and meaning. I neither defend nor question what he is saying—I just read it. Talking a little of scientific dilemma, he says:

Between these extremes we all flounder, choosing to close our eyes to ultimate questions and proceeding, instead, with classification and experiment. [Eiseley, *Strange Hours*, 246]

And then he talks about the great sphex wasps, which have an incredible—literally incredible—capacity to do things they have never seen done in a way that is so magnificently complex that they must learn how to do it in some way that we don't understand. And Eiseley traces the marvelous way in which an adult sphex wasp, a mother, finds the quarry and stuns it without killing it, knowing the way to do that with her own weapon. She then puts that quarry in the nest it has dug under the ground and lays her egg in the quarry, which remains alive but insensate, and the newborn wasp eats the food that has been provided without killing the host until its own strength is adequate. The newborn wasp then exits its tomb and begins its life, possessed somehow with the specific capacity to do what its predecessor has done.

Eiseley quotes Henri Fabre:

"It is not in chance that we will find the key to such harmonies." "The man grappling with reality," he concludes, "fails to find a serious explanation of anything whatsoever that he sees." [In Eiseley, *Strange Hours*, 248]

There is so much here that is marvelous. What it really is, is a testimony of humility. Eiseley finishes with a line that I'll share:

I had spent a lifetime exploring questions for which I no longer pretended to have answers, or to fully accept the answers of others. I was slowly growing

as insubstantial as the sunlight on this hillside. I could not account for myself any more than I could validate in material terms the strange anatomical charts that slept, for now inactivated, in the tombs beneath my feet. [Eiseley, *Strange Hours*, 253]

Now that obviously required some rereading and thought. Loren Eiseley says that having spent a lifetime doing wonderful scholarship, he has discovered that many of the answers are beyond the finiteness of this earth—not that he has turned against scholarship, not that he discounts all that he and others have tried to discover, but simply that the answers are not all there.

Let me conclude in these few moments with one of those answers that I am so prayerfully anxious to share with you. This letter came at Christmastime. I would not for anything betray a confidence this letter so warmly shares. I will simply tell you that the person who wrote it is a graduate of this institution. He writes from prison, where he is in the ward for very serious consequential crime—sin also. He has lost it all. He is brilliant and lettered, and his name can be read here and there. He has done very well in the world. He is very young. Everything was ahead of him, and then this act or series of acts took away his own conscience and his freedom. His sins alienated him then from others and ultimately from God, from the Church, and from the things so dear and precious. Now he writes from a prison, and I share some of what he writes with you. I plead with you to listen with your hearts and your heads to these few sentences. He talks of a happy situation inside this unbelievably tragic place. He himself has been given an assignment that permits him to help others. What all this represents is a miracle. I can put no other label on it.

I've had a job that has allowed me to keep my mind active. I have won the respect of people who trust me. The tears come frequently, but in my setting I can let them. I have a room not unlike a college

dormitory. It is private. There I can let the emotions vent, can pray, study, write, and weep. The time is tortuous nonetheless, but not beyond my capacities because compensatory blessings were granted. I do not understand all of this, but I am grateful.

He mentions a person who has helped him. I can only pick out a line or two of this marvelous paragraph: "She knows me and accepts me. I feel better about myself than in all my life. She has helped to heal me. For the first time my spirit feels free to be itself." She has had a difficult life, too. He tells of a position she has which permits her to express her great heart to those who are seriously handicapped. And this is his final paragraph—again, it might save your life. "She has made adversity turn to advantage," he writes. He then goes on:

Perhaps it is this last thought that expresses the most forceful image I have of Christ. He took the curse of adversity and made it the blessing of advantage. I see Him on the cross, blessing the thief, forgiving the murderers of His own life. I read over and over about the difficulties and the costs of His associating with the poor and the outcasts and of His love for them. Peter was right. Christ did go and preach to the spirits in prison. What else might we expect Him to do?

Then he refers to Paul's descriptions in the first chapter of Romans of the absolute decadence of that time and says, "That's how it is in this prison. It's an exact picture of my surroundings and the nature of man openly fallen." So much of what he then goes on to say about the fallen state of all men, even those not condemned under the law, is so appropriate. He is quoting scripture and interlarding it with his own comments:

There is none righteous — no, not one. There is none that understand it, and the operation of the law is so that all the world may become guilty before God. And that is the crux of my problem. Righteousness

and relief from guilt cannot come from my punishment or the functioning of the law. By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight. But while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. [See Romans 3]

Don't misunderstand his last words. They are a testimony of the highest quality of the truthfulness of what we have been taught in these days through the prophets of God. They need to be carefully considered.

When I understood the grace of Christ, I experienced that grace, that great sense of forgiveness. So much remains to be done — so much restitution that I hope I will be allowed to make. But I won't have to buy into any more guilt trips. There will always be sorrow for my mistakes. There will always be heartbreak. There may never be forgiveness by others I have hurt. But I don't have to beat myself into mental illness. "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" [Romans 5:20], and I am humbled by the grace which He has given me. I who was so full of insecurities and false pride — I who felt superior to others — now know my true worth and am no longer afraid. I have lost my life but found it.

God bless you as I earnestly pray He will bless me and mine. I pray that we may have a sense of the mission and meaning, the measure of the gift, and the beauty of the love of the Lord. I pray that we may use this knowledge to fulfill the expectations the Lord has clearly put before us: to love God with everything we have, to love our neighbor as ourselves. We can only do that by obeying His law, having confidence in Him, repenting of our sins, obeying His commandments, walking by the Spirit, and enduring the injustices of this world and its iniquities with faith.

I bear witness to you that I learned a few things during the holidays, more deeply than I ever learned them before, and they are the simple things that I have thought I understood all my life. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.