

Receiving

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When I was young, my parents reminded me often that it is better to give than to receive. I used to hear this frequently at Christmastime. The statement is true enough, because the natural man is selfish, and learning how *not* to be selfish is one of life's most important pursuits.

But today I would like to discuss the reasons why it is important that we learn how to *receive*. Because this is a lesson that I am trying to learn myself, much of my address will be autobiographical.

When I graduated from high school, I had the opportunity to spend the summer and fall with two friends working in a factory in a city far from home. We attended the local branch of the Church. The members there thought we were an interesting bunch—three young men away from home, going to work in a factory each day doing things we weren't particularly good at, yet obviously surviving from day to day.

We often received invitations from branch members to have dinner at their homes, and we always turned them down. It wasn't until years later that I realized that to do so was a big mistake. You see, we turned them down because we thought it was the noble thing to do. We had sufficient finances, we could take

care of ourselves, and *we* didn't want to inconvenience anyone. We didn't realize at the time that in not accepting invitations to dinner, we were missing out on good experiences and fellowship with kindly Latter-day Saints. But, more important, we were depriving others of the blessing of serving us, and we were depriving ourselves of the blessing of *receiving* their service. Our real issue, of course, was pride. We were too proud to receive service from others who wished simply to bless our lives.

It is remarkable how often the scriptures teach that we must receive. For example, when we are confirmed members of the Church, we are told to "receive" the Holy Ghost. We cannot compel or conjure the Spirit's presence; we can only *receive* what has been freely offered. Likewise, the verb commonly used with the phrase "remission of sin" is *receive*. We can't *make* a remission of sin, earn it, attain it, or create it. Our faithfulness is required, but it is Jesus' agency that brings the remission of our sins to pass. And, finally, we are to be perfect, but we cannot perfect ourselves. The Book of Mormon teaches that we are to be "perfected"

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in Christ, something that is done “by his grace” (Moroni 10:32). The passive voice shows that we are not the doers of the verb but the receivers. Indeed, any notion that we have of personal spiritual accomplishment or self-sufficiency is shattered as we read the scriptures and come to a better understanding of the gospel. Peter learned this lesson the hard way when he refused Jesus’ humble act of servitude, saying, “Thou shalt never wash my feet.” Jesus responded, “If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me” (John 13:8).

Once I was in Turkey with a busload of American tourists. One day we were sitting in our bus after a visit, waiting to continue our trip. Next to where we were parked was a fruit-and-vegetable shop. As we were sitting in the bus, I noticed a boy about ten years old leave the shop and board the bus with a box of fresh cucumbers to give to the people on the bus. Middle Eastern cucumbers are sweet and delicious, and people eat them for snacks. The boy had dressed up for his mission to our bus with his suit coat on and his hair freshly combed and still moist from the combing. I was touched by the kindness of the boy and his shopkeeper father for providing this treat as an act of love and hospitality for the foreigners in their town. It was in keeping with what I have grown to love so much from the culture of Muslims in the Middle East. The smiling boy walked from the front of the bus to the back, offering the delicious treats along the way. There were enough for all. As he began to walk back to the front of the bus, someone offered him money, which he refused; getting money was not the boy’s objective in bringing the cucumbers. The American became insistent and eventually stuffed some money into the boy’s pocket, much to the boy’s embarrassment and dismay. As he tried to escape to the front of the bus, others followed suit, putting money in his pockets or throwing it in his box. As he made his way to the front exit, I noticed his expression change from happiness to disap-

pointment to embarrassment to sadness. By the time he arrived at the front, he was in tears.

I was heartbroken and embarrassed. The boy was deeply hurt. His act of love had been prostituted into an act of business.

But the people on the bus—all fine people—felt good about themselves; they felt justified. Someone had provided them with a service for which they needed to pay. They had paid their own way, and they didn’t want to owe anything to anybody.

I have found that the philosophy of self-sufficiency that underlies these instincts runs deep in many Latter-day Saints. Some think, “I don’t need any help. I can take care of myself, and everybody else should do the same.” This idea forms the basis of the political and social feelings of many, and it has caused not a few Latter-day Saints to not only miss blessings in life but also to misunderstand the nature of the gospel.

In fact, God has created us to be *dependent* on others. And “dependent” means that we must quickly learn that others have things to offer us without which we cannot live. It is true that many of the Lord’s creations never see a parent and are able to be self-sufficient the moment they hatch out of an egg. But not so with God’s children. The most helpless creature on the planet is a newly born human, who could not survive for more than a few hours without immediate care. Newborn humans are programmed from birth to receive—and to do so for years. We remain dependent on others for the basics of life for a long time and usually aren’t financially independent until our mid-twenties or later. Along the way, our quest is to continue receiving where we must, but to gain independence so eventually we can do more for ourselves. The conflict between our dependence and our imagined self-sufficiency starts early. Children, still very dependent on their parents, do things to demonstrate their independence. This was the source of most of the

traumas you had with your parents while you were growing up.

Some of the greatest lessons of life, and the sweetest experiences, result from the giving and receiving between parent and child. Watching my children learn to walk was one of the best experiences of my life. Watching them learn to drive was not. Watching my children learn to speak, to read, and to make decisions; participating in their baptisms and ordinations; and witnessing their marriages made me a better person and welded our hearts together. And seeing them go off on their own, with various levels of independence, has been a blessing both for parent and child.

But we remain dependent in many ways throughout our lives. Sister Jackson and our four adult daughters are best friends and have frequent outings together. I still miss my parents, both of whom passed away in recent years, and even my grandparents, who died forty years ago. The emotional bonds of mutual dependence within families are part of God's plan and are not intended to go away, even with death.

Sometimes, when things go very wrong, we have a clear understanding of our need for others and know that we have no choice but to ask for and receive help. On those occasions our plight is obvious.

Years ago, I was with a friend from another university driving through the deserts of Jordan looking at obscure archaeological sites. In the middle of nowhere we had a flat tire. We soon found that there wasn't a workable spare in our rental car. This was in the days prior to mobile phones, so we had no option but to ask for help from total strangers. We jacked up the car, took off the tire, and stood by the side of the road. The very first vehicle that came by stopped and took us in. It was a small local bus. The occupants of the bus immediately got into a vigorous discussion about where the nearest tire shop was located. When they sorted it out, the van took us out of its way to

a tire shop in a nearby town. The driver would accept no fare for our transportation. The repairman fixed the tire and wouldn't accept money for the repair job. We then stood out on the highway with our tire, and again the first vehicle that came by picked us up and took us back to our car. We put the tire back on and went on with our trip.

The next morning we headed off again for another day of exploration. History repeated itself. We soon had another flat tire with no spare. We jacked up the car, took off the tire, and stood by the side of the road. The first vehicle that came along stopped, let us in, and took us to a tire shop in the next town. The repairman fixed the tire. We then stood out on the road with our tire, and again the first vehicle that came along picked us up and took us back to our car. We put the tire back on and went on with our trip.

Now, you are probably thinking one or both of the following thoughts:

Number 1: Was there ever really a time in which there were no mobile phones?

Number 2: This story would never happen in Provo.

But let me add a few other thoughts. What if we had been unwilling to accept the reality that we had a serious need? Would we still be sitting in that car today? What if we had been unwilling to receive help? What if we had refused to accept the generosity of those who gave us assistance? After all, we received all four rides and one of the repair jobs for free. What if we had concluded that Arab generosity was silly and old-fashioned and we didn't want to have anything to do with it?

Well, we had no other options, we knew that we were in need of help, and we were smart enough to accept it when it came.

Most of our needs are not as obvious, and so we are sometimes deluded into thinking we can work things out on our own. What a

tragedy it is when those occasions involve the things that matter most.

I have witnessed in my life that God often answers our prayers through other people. When we earnestly pray for help, someone might cross our path at the right time to say the right word, lift a burden we are bearing, or simply provide conversation and companionship. Such events are usually unexpected, but they *aren't* coincidences. We have all heard stories about someone being prompted to contact someone, knowing, “She needs me,” or “He’s in trouble,” thereby averting some sorrow or tragedy. But most of the time the promptings are much more subtle, and the earthly ministering angel doesn’t even know that he or she is being prompted. Either way the result is a miracle. The New Testament tells us that “some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews 13:2)—a reminder that we are always on the Lord’s errand to bless others and that others are on the Lord’s errand to bless us.

I learn two things from such experiences. First, I need always to be sensitive to the needs of people around me. What if *I* am to be the answer to someone’s prayer or someone’s need and I’m not sensitive to the prompting or I’m too preoccupied with my own concerns or too selfish to want to give of myself? I suspect that this has happened before.

Second, I need to be humble enough to receive of the kindness of others. How foolish would it be of me to ask the Lord’s blessing and then turn down those He sends to respond to my prayers?

Learning how to receive is an antidote to pride. King Benjamin asked, “Are we not all beggars?” The answer is yes. He continued, “Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have?” (Mosiah 4:19). Again the answer is yes. A foolish person will consider such talk to be quaint, but a wise person will recognize this to be the foundation of our lives. King Benjamin

taught how thoroughly we are dependent on God:

O how you ought to thank your heavenly King!

I say unto you, my brethren, that if you should render all the thanks and praise which your whole soul has power to possess, to that God who has created you, and has kept and preserved you . . .

. . . and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants.

And behold, all that he requires of you is to keep his commandments; [and] if ye do keep his commandments he doth bless you and prosper you. . . .

. . . He doth require that ye should do as he hath commanded you; for which if ye do, he doth immediately bless you; and therefore he hath paid you. And ye are still indebted unto him, and are, and will be, forever and ever; therefore, of what have ye to boast?

And now I ask, can ye say aught of yourselves? I answer you, Nay. Ye cannot say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth; yet ye were created of the dust of the earth; but behold, it belongeth to him who created you. [Mosiah 2:19–22, 24–25]

How are we to respond to this situation? King Benjamin said that we can’t even boast of the dirt we’re made of because we don’t own the dirt! God creates us, preserves us from day to day, gives us breath so we can do what we want, and supports us from one moment to the next. We can’t do any of this on our own, and yet we can’t repay Him for any of it either. Moreover, when we do what He asks us to do—obey His commandments—what does He do? He immediately blesses us again and hence pays us, which places us even more in His debt.

We can’t pay God back. We can never be “even” with Him. We will always owe Him. If you want life to be fair, you have come to the wrong planet. In the long run—the eternal long

run—we all get much, much more than we deserve.

The word *grace* means service freely rendered. In a gospel context, grace is what the Father and the Son do for us that we cannot do for ourselves. The list is very long. Think about our eternal existence. We have a spirit that we did not create; it is a gift of grace from God. We have a physical body that we did not create; it is a gift of grace from God, brought to pass by the service of others. We cannot baptize ourselves, ordain ourselves, bless ourselves, endow ourselves, or seal ourselves; all are gifts of grace from God, brought about by the service of others. We cannot take away our own sins; the Atonement is a gift of grace from God, brought about through Jesus Christ. Likewise, we cannot resurrect ourselves; that will be a gift of grace from God. And we cannot clothe ourselves with eternal glory; that also will be a gift of grace from God.

Indeed, the gospel teaches us that we cannot bring ourselves to heaven. If we want to have a happy eternity, we need to receive the atoning work that only Jesus Christ can do. We must admit that there is no way we can pay Him for it, and there is nothing we can give Him to make us “even.” The only thing He asks in return is that we keep His commandments. And when we do, He then blesses us more.

Thus King Benjamin asks, “Of what have ye to boast?” “Can ye say aught of yourselves? I answer you, Nay.”

So what are we to do? The point is that we are to admit that this inequity exists. We are to *receive* this moral imbalance and receive it gladly, embrace it, welcome it, and feel good about it. But as King Benjamin said, feeling good about it is not to boast but to be thankful for it. We don’t need to be embarrassed about our debt to our Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son. Our Father in Heaven will *always* be our God, and Jesus will *always* be our Savior. Through all eternity we will sing praises to Their names and acknowledge our

indebtedness to Them. In this life we need to be truly and deeply thankful. Our thankfulness will motivate us to obediently keep Their commandments—not out of guilt or debt or fear, but out of genuine love for Them. We keep God’s commandments and love Him, as the apostle John taught, because He loved us first (see 1 John 4:19). And then He blesses us more.

How, then, do we translate this attitude of receiving into our relationships with other people? I suggest that we learn to ask for help when we need it, that we receive it when it’s offered, that we not feel guilty about doing so, and that we recognize that in serving us, others are the Lord’s ministering angels doing His work. Here are some of the events that have helped me learn this principle.

When I was in graduate school, my wife and I hosted other couples in our home for dinner from time to time. We soon found that the instinct of many people was that if we invited *them* to dinner, they owed *us* a dinner in return. We enjoyed the fellowship, but this made the dinners a trade, which wasn’t what we had in mind. After some consideration, we changed our strategy and told people we invited that if they wanted to return the favor, they should do so by inviting *others* to their home instead of us, thus spreading the blessing of hospitality. I thought it was a good idea, but we probably offended a lot of ward members.

Sister Jackson and I are aware that other people pray in our behalf. In some ways, prayers offered in our behalf by others may be more powerful than those we pray for ourselves. We know and feel the power of such prayers, and doing so has motivated us to reach out in our own prayers beyond our own small circle in ways we never did before.

We live in a very loving neighborhood in which blessing the lives of others is part of the day-to-day culture. Once or twice a year we have a neighborhood picnic on our street. On one such occasion about a dozen years ago, I was sitting in a lawn chair eating. I was having

a hard time getting my cup of lemonade to sit securely on the grass next to my chair without it tipping over. Noticing my plight, a little girl from the neighborhood, about five or six years old, ran over and volunteered to sit on the ground next to my chair and hold my cup steady on the grass. It would have been a lot less work for both of us if I had just drunk the lemonade, but I couldn't resist the purehearted offer of service. Every so often I would tell her I needed a drink. She would hand me the cup, I would drink, and then she would put it back on the grass and hold it steady until I needed it again.

Every Saturday my bishop works his way down our street edging people's lawns. What a tremendous image it provides for us to see this good, humble man serving his neighbors in this way. I didn't ask him to do our lawn. He just showed up one day and did it. At first I was embarrassed to see him working in my front yard. He's a very busy man with much to do, and I hadn't edged our lawn since the 1980s. But receiving his service has been a blessing far beyond the appearance of our yard. And the beautiful, straight edge of our lawn is a reminder of a service freely rendered and gladly received.

In my patriarchal blessing I was told to counsel with my mother and receive guidance from her. I found throughout my life that when I did so, I was blessed with wisdom beyond my own abilities. Likewise, when I was struggling with a health issue several years ago, I received a blessing in which I was told in clear language, "Listen to your wife." I apparently didn't do so very well, because six months later, in a similar blessing under the hands of someone else, I was told again, "Listen to your wife." Being willing to receive her counsel was

an important part of the healing process. On that second occasion I was prompted also to finally receive the counsel of my doctor. My stubbornness in thinking I could diagnose myself was not serving me well.

Life has many such occasions in which we need the intervention of others who have a clearer vision of things than we do. Our challenge is to be humble enough to receive what they have to offer.

Sometimes life is not wonderful, and we have to learn to receive hard things as well as happy things. It is often the case that in receiving life's most difficult experiences, we grow and benefit the most. One of the great lessons we can learn from the Book of Mormon is that there will be times when good, worthy people find themselves in bad circumstances, not of their own making, that are beyond their ability to remedy on their own. Consider these two passages:

"And now the afflictions of the Nephites were great, and there was no way that they could deliver themselves" (Mosiah 21:5). Later we read, "And he did exhort . . . all those that had been delivered out of bondage, that they should remember that it was the Lord that did deliver them" (Mosiah 25:16).

As in the Book of Mormon, when the Lord provides deliverance, or *any* blessing for us, He often does it through our fellow human beings, sent to serve in His stead if we are willing to receive them. These earthly ministering angels are types of Jesus Christ, the ultimate Ministering Angel. He stands at the door and knocks—sometimes in person and sometimes through the service of others. But *we* are the ones who need to open the door and receive His blessings. That we may do so is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.