

Spiritual Leprosy

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I have spent a lot of pleasant moments in this same auditorium that we're in today as I was here as a student. I also spent some times when I was awake. I remember sitting down on about the sixth row right here fifteen years ago, and I was holding hands with my wife before she was my wife. We left in the middle of that concert and went over to the Wilkinson Center and got engaged. It was very romantic. It was probably the smartest thing I ever did actually, but it wasn't easy. Margaret was a very popular young lady on campus. I'll tell you how popular she was. I saw her at a dance my first week on campus, and I found out where she lived and went to her apartment to introduce myself. As I was walking up to the door, I noticed that there was this little ticket machine kind of like the ones you see at Baskin-Robbins, you know. So I took a ticket—apparently the landlord had placed it there to cut down on the confusion—and was about to knock on the door when another fellow came out, a nice-looking guy. I said, "Say, what number are you?" He said, "I'm number nine." I looked at my ticket and it said 340. So, it took me two and one half years from that time to get my date, but I did it, and I love her very much. She is the mother of our children and my sweetheart and my companion.

President Ballif mentioned that my undergraduate studies here at BYU were in chemistry, and I ended up with a Ph.D. in business. I did have the blessing of the Chemistry Department to make that switch. I'll tell you why. As a senior I needed one credit to graduate, and so I asked Professor Hawkins, who was my organic professor, if I could do a special project for him, and he said yes. I worked in the lab that was in his private office. He had a hood there, and I set up my experiment, and it went along week after week. One day, as we heated it up to as high a temperature as it ought to go to make it work, he was seated at his desk grading papers, and I was working at the lab behind him. I heard a little rumbling sound in there, and I said, "You know, Professor Hawkins, I think we might have a problem here." The next minute the whole thing blew up—just a tremendous explosion that shook the walls, and people came running down the hall and stuck their heads in to see what was going on. It nearly blew Professor Hawkins

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right out of his chair. Whereupon, after we cleaned up the mess, he put his arm around my shoulder and said, “About going into business administration, I think it’s a wonderful idea.” Now, that’s true; it really happened.

One of the great blessings of my life has been the opportunity to work with young people in the Church, both as a director of the MBA program and, perhaps even more importantly, as a bishop. I appreciate the opportunity to address a religious theme today. I’d like to talk to you about a principle that I have observed in the last few years as I have read the scriptures.

Scriptural Accounts of Leprosy

I can remember being interested in the many accounts in both the Old and New Testaments that describe the plight of those with the disease of leprosy. Among those accounts there are two that stand out in my mind. The first is found in the Old Testament in 2 Kings and is about Naaman, the captain of the Syrian army who was himself a leper. I’m sure you are familiar with the story. Naaman’s wife had an Israelite handmaiden who suggested that, if Naaman were to go see the prophet in Israel, he could be cured of his leprosy. So the king of Syria sent a letter to the king of Israel, saying, and I quote from 2 Kings 5:6–7,

I have therewith sent Naaman my servant to thee, that thou mayest recover him of his leprosy.

And it came to pass, when the king of Israel had read the letter, that he rent his clothes, and said, Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that his man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy? Wherefore consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me.

As you can see, the king of Israel thought that this was just a sneaky way to start a fight. But Elisha the prophet heard about the letter and sent to the king saying,

Let him [Naaman] come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel.

So Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. [2 Kings 5:8–9]

You remember, at this point Elisha didn’t even bother to come to the door but sent a messenger to Naaman telling him to go wash seven times in the River Jordan. Naaman replied much the way some of us do when counseled by the prophet (and I’m paraphrasing), “You mean I came all the way from Syria, and I don’t even get to see the main man! And you send out a servant who tells me to wash seven times in an irrigation canal” (apparently their Jordan River looked a lot like our Jordan River).

Well, Naaman listened to some wise friends, as we often do, and was humbled by the sweet Spirit of the Lord. The scriptures tell us,

Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. [2 Kings 5:14]

If you want to know, as Paul Harvey would say, “the rest of the story,” you may wish to read the remainder of chapter 5 of 2 Kings to find out what happened to the servant of Elisha.

The second account is found in the New Testament and should be equally familiar to you. Let me quote briefly from Luke 17, beginning with verse 12:

And as he entered into a certain village, there met him ten men that were lepers, which stood afar off:

And they lifted up their voices, and said, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.

And when he saw them, he said unto them, Go shew yourselves unto the priests. And it came to pass, that, as they went, they were cleansed.

And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God,

And fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan.

And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?

There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger.

And he said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole. [Luke 17:12–19]

There are many interesting aspects to these two accounts concerning leprosy, but I would like to focus for a moment on the disease itself. One feature of leprosy that comes through clearly in the scriptures is its lack of subtlety. If you had it, everyone knew it. In fact, there was no need to ask about the condition of a hapless victim. The victim himself was required to announce in a loud voice to everyone, “Unclean, unclean.”

The second feature, and to me the more interesting, relates to a specific medical aspect of the disease: Leprosy causes a progressive loss of feeling in the affected parts of the body. At some point the disease so seriously affects the nerves that there is no longer any feeling in, say, a hand or a foot. Our immediate reaction might be that no feeling means no pain and perhaps less suffering for the victim. But this is not the case. Pain plays a very beneficial role in our welfare. It tells us in a loud voice (both figuratively and literally) when we place our hand on a hot stove. We know immediately if the hunting knife comes in contact with a leg or a foot. But we are warned only if the nerves are sending signals. We are warned if the signals have not been blocked by a disease like leprosy.

In fact, this loss of feeling is a very serious problem for someone with leprosy. The person may, for example, place a hand on a hot stove and not know it until the hand is burned so severely that it cannot be healed.

Spiritual Leprosy

Today we rarely see an actual case of leprosy. Indeed, most of us have never seen or heard of anyone having it. But there is a similar disease, a counterpart, an analogue to leprosy that is very much with us. I speak of a condition I would like to refer to as *spiritual leprosy*.

The distinctive feature of spiritual leprosy, like its physical counterpart, is a *progressive loss of feeling*. It is a progressive loss of feeling that takes place not in our nerves but in our sensitivity to the Spirit and to its promptings. This progressive loss of contact with the Holy Ghost makes spiritual leprosy as threatening to our souls as the physical disease is to our bodies.

But how do we get it? What causes the onset of the disease? Spiritual leprosy, like any disease, results from the combination of an environment and a response. We create the environment anytime we do something that offends the Spirit of the Lord. We have all been in such a position. It may be unkind words we have spoken to a roommate or a spouse; it may be the R-rated movie just seen, the seedy magazine or book read, an act of dishonesty, or maybe our conduct on a date. In any case what we have done is wrong, and we know it, often because we “feel bad.” It’s interesting, isn’t it, that we use exactly the same words to describe a spiritual condition that we might use to describe a physical condition?

When we say we “feel bad” about something we have done, I suppose we are experiencing a kind of spiritual pain. Now, a very critical point in the whole issue is how we respond to the spiritual pain. As I have thought about it, there seem to be as many different kinds of responses to spiritual pain as there are to physical pain. Sometimes we just try to ignore it and hope it will go away. Or we may simply try to relieve the symptoms without getting at the root cause. For example, for physical pain we take a pain killer such as aspirin, which typically doesn’t solve our problem, but at least it doesn’t hurt for awhile.

My wife teases me by saying that, anytime I feel sick, my response is that I need exercise like basketball. Several weeks ago my brother-in-law, who is a medical doctor, was sick so I called him to see how he was feeling. I told him that I had had the same thing the week before, and I knew just what to do for it. There I was telling a medical doctor what to do. He said, “Oh, good, tell me what to do.” You see, I had him right there. I’d been waiting for ten years to have him ask me what to do for something. I told him to take two gym shoes, play thirty minutes of basketball, and call me in the morning.

Unfortunately, we sometimes respond with similar physical approaches to cure the symptoms of spiritual pain. We get drunk on alcohol or high on drugs; we try to escape, to run away. The pain may be so intense we contemplate suicide.

Of course, the persistence of spiritual pain is a sure sign that there is something wrong. The reasonable response to persistent physical pain is to seek medical attention from a doctor. But what is the reasonable response for spiritual pain? As students of the gospel, we know it is to recognize our mistake and with humility and sincerity to seek forgiveness. The unmistakable invitation of our Lord is found in Matthew 11:28–30, where he said:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

If our immediate response were to go to our Heavenly Father and ask forgiveness, our spirits would be whole and in tune and free from disease. But, my young brothers and sisters, when we know we’ve done wrong and we delay or we fail altogether to seek forgiveness, at that point some of our spiritual nerves quit working. When that happens, we have

contracted spiritual leprosy. The more we offend the Spirit and the longer we offend the Spirit, the worse the disease gets. The spiritual pain that is a signal to us to change our behavior is more and more blocked out until our spirits can be accosted by the red hot fire of serious sin, and we cannot know when to draw back our hand!

A Major Handicap

This is a serious problem for persons of any age. We all need to be able to receive inspiration. There are serious spiritual challenges that must be met at every stage in life. But there are two reasons why this deadening of the spiritual senses is a major handicap to young people of your age. The first reason is that this is the time in your life when many important decisions must be made. Let me remind you specifically of two. First, you must choose a career. A decision that will affect 40 percent of your waking hours for the next forty years is not one to be taken lightly. I don’t mean to increase the anxiety you may already feel at the prospect of sorting out the answer to the problem. The point is that this is no time to be without inspiration and guidance from the Lord.

Besides choosing a career, you must also choose a mate. Some of you are already suffering from analysis paralysis over that issue. You need spiritual insight at this time in your life more than at any other. There are, in addition to these two decisions, many others of importance that you will grapple with in the next several years to come. What does it mean to have integrity? Am I really committed to the Church and the gospel? Do I truly want to honor my parents? Am I willing to serve others, or would I rather be selfish with my time and money?

As you already know, the list of life’s issues is long, and you will not have all your problems solved at age 27, or 37, or 47. That’s the second reason that you cannot allow yourself to be afflicted by the deadening of your

spiritual nerve endings. Right now, as you struggle with career decisions and marriage decisions and the others I've spoken of, you are developing a pattern of decision making that will affect the way you make decisions for many years to come. You need to practice now how to incorporate the Spirit into your decision-making process. You cannot practice well if you are handicapped by spiritual leprosy any more than you can practice football while you have a broken leg.

If you would be in a position to be in tune and receive the guidance you desire and need, your spirits must be as healthy as you can possibly make them. But it is not easy to take the steps necessary to heal our spirits. We feel embarrassed by our mistakes. We are ashamed to face our family. We are afraid to talk to our bishop, afraid we'll lose his respect or fearful of the consequences. All these feelings contribute to the continued disability of our spirits and keep us from achieving spiritual health.

Key Is Courage

However, unlike our physical bodies, which are sometimes crippled and diseased beyond repair, our spirits can be healed. The key is courage. It takes a lot of courage. We must deal with our spiritual afflictions with the same courage that we observe in those around us who have physical afflictions. Perhaps because the physical afflictions are more readily apparent, we are more alert to the courage displayed by those who do battle with them.

I will never forget the example of Paul Taylor who had the office next to mine at the University of California at Berkeley. Paul was in his seventies, and I'm convinced he was the model for the comedian Tim Conway's portrayal of the old man who takes tiny, slow steps wherever he goes. Paul walked so slowly that he couldn't get out of the elevator before the door closed on him. It was obviously not easy for him to get around, but he still came to the office every day. I didn't think much of it until

I noticed one day that he had a Band-Aid on each eye. One end of each Band-Aid was hooked onto his eyelid, and the other end went up over his eyebrow and was stuck on his forehead. I chuckled at that for a minute until I realized that, without the Band-Aids, Paul's eyelids wouldn't stay open. Paul could have stayed home, and at age 75 he had every right, but that wasn't getting him anywhere. You see, even though he could only take tiny little steps, with the Band-Aids on his eyelids, he could see and move forward and make progress.

Or what about the young man I saw one day in Berkeley as I was going to the university? I was driving along daydreaming a little about making a slam dunk over the top of Julius Erving and was about to turn right at an intersection. I noticed out of the corner of my eye a young man maybe sixteen or seventeen walking fast and about to cross where I was turning. He wasn't slowing down, and about twenty feet before he got to the intersection, he went like this: "YAAAAH!" Did that scare you? It scared me. I about jumped right out of my driver's seat. He went right across the street without breaking stride, and I said to myself, "that kid is a bona fide, card-carrying crazy!" I went on to work and didn't think much of it, but about three or four days later I saw the same boy again. This time he was in the middle of the block, and I slowed down to get a good look at him. You know what I realized? The boy was blind. He also had a big Band-Aid across the middle of his forehead, and I can imagine how it probably got there.

Can you see the determination this young man had? He walked fast, yelled at cars. He was not about to let a little thing like being blind slow him down in life.

The courage of Paul Taylor and the determination of the blind boy were obvious as they confronted their physical afflictions. We need that same kind of courage and determination as we grapple with our spiritual afflictions. Fortunately, none of us is ever totally blind

spiritually. But maybe we have a few Band-Aids on our foreheads from running into things when our spiritual eyes have been closed. We need to have the courage to put Band-Aids on our spiritual eyelids and begin the process of healing our spirits.

Let me tell you about David Brenner. David is in a wheelchair and has limited use of his hands as a result of a diving accident suffered many years ago. David signed up for a 400 level financial management course I was teaching during spring term about two years ago. I remember that David, in spite of being in a wheelchair, made it to every lecture, handed in all assignments, and did very well in the class. But there was one small, very quiet incident that left an indelible impression on my mind. For the final exam I required that the students use a blue book for their answers, and I happened to look over at David just as he was attempting to turn a page in his blue book so he could continue writing down the answers. He struggled and struggled and struggled. Finally, after what was easily five agonizing minutes, he managed to turn the page. You and I worry about studying and about the answers. David had to worry about just turning the pages. Do your spirits sometimes struggle just to turn the pages? Some of us are confronted each day with spiritual problems whose solutions others take for granted in much the same way that you or I take for granted our ability to turn pages. Life's really great battles are fought as we labor each day to muster the quiet courage it takes to get our spirits just to "turn the pages."

You know, I am well into my thirties—in fact, about as well into them as you can get and still be in them—and I have never spent a day in a hospital since I was born. My friend Dee Ann Hoffer will be 22 in a few months. She has spent fourteen years in a hospital—not fourteen days, fourteen years. In other words, 5000 of the roughly 8000 days she's been alive have been spent in the hospital. She has one of those

motorized wheelchairs. Hers has only two speeds—fast and move over, General Lee. I've only heard Dee Ann complain once. It was at a ward dance. She asked me to dance one of the fast dances with her. I thought she was teasing, but I walked a little way onto the dance floor with her, whereupon she reared her wheelchair back into a full "wheeley" position and did the neatest little two-step—or should I say "two-wheel"?—that you have ever seen. You want to know what her complaint was? It was that, for a guy with two good feet, I didn't dance too well!

I think Dee Ann would admit that her body is pretty much a wreck, but her spirit is whole and healthy and alive. She talks to her Heavenly Father, and he listens, and she has the courage to get up each day and continue that fight. Perhaps you've made a mistake that makes you feel that your spirit has spent 5000 days in the hospital. It takes courage to fix that kind of wreck, but if Dee Ann can do it physically, you can do it spiritually.

Just one more example, and then I'll conclude. I was serving as bishop of the BYU 36th Ward several years ago about this time as spring term was beginning. At the conclusion of our first Sunday meetings, a young lady came up to introduce herself to me. She walked with difficulty and with an accentuated stammer. Her facial features were somewhat distorted, and her speech was obviously impaired. I later learned Carol had had cerebral palsy as a child and had been left with a severe physical handicap. We visited for a minute, and then she left. You know what I, as her good bishop, did? I thought to myself, "Here is a girl who is probably going to need a lot of special attention, take up a lot of my time, probably be a burden on us and her roommates." You know, that may just possibly be the most inaccurate, knee-jerk reaction I've ever had. Let me tell you why.

Several days later our ward had an opening social on the lawn by the King Henry swimming pool. One of our new ward members,

who was a big handsome six feet of tan body and solid muscle (like me when I was his age), dove off the diving board and bumped his head on the bottom of the pool. He didn't seem to bump it very hard, but nevertheless he got out of the pool and went over and lay underneath a tree and moaned a little. Whether he was really injured or not was hard to tell, but it doesn't matter. What matters is that I sat and watched as Carol struggled over to the table where the food was and somehow managed to get some food on a plate and struggled back to the tree where the six-foot mass of moaning muscle was lying. She helped him eat, she stayed with him, and she took care of him.

And, you see, I had worried about Carol's being a burden on someone. Carol baked cookies for people, she took them places in her car, and she took care of them when they were sick. When she bore her testimony, it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Her spirit was well, and she had great courage and great faith.

One Sunday I announced that the combined stakes were planning a five-mile fun run and that, since we old men in the bishopric were planning to run, everyone else ought to run too. Carol decided that, if old men could run, she could run. Now, honestly, to watch Carol, you would not think she could walk a block, let alone run anyplace. But she developed a kind of shuffling gait and worked out until she said she was sure she could cover five miles.

The day of the run came, and there were about fifty or sixty of us from the ward that showed up—and there was Carol. We decided that we would assign some ward members to stay with her until she got tired, and then they could go back and get the car and pick her up. So the race began. There were several thousand runners, and after a few blocks I lost track of Carol and most of the other ward members. We ended by running into an entrance on the southeast side of the football stadium and around the track to the finish line at about the middle of the west side.

The race had ended, and nearly all the runners had crossed the finish line and were standing in small groups or sitting in the stadium chairs. There were a bunch of us from the ward congratulating ourselves on surviving, and then we remembered Carol. No one could remember seeing her, and it was now almost a half an hour since the last runner had come in. We were worried, and so eight or ten of us decided to run back along the course to see if we could find her. As we got back to the other side of the track, we could see her in her staggering walk coming down the street toward the entrance to the stadium. She made it through the entrance and onto the track and then began her jogging shuffle because she wanted to end the race in style.

Well, we all jogged along with her and shouted encouragement. We got around the track to the west stands, and everyone stood up and started cheering and shouting. She crossed the finish line, and we all threw our arms around her and hugged her and jumped up and down with her for joy.

Carol had class and style and courage. Her spirit was healthy. My young brothers and sisters, it is not easy to overcome our spiritual shortcomings, to cure our spiritual leprosy. It takes determination and courage. But I know there are roommates and family members and Church leaders who wait with their arms open to throw them around you as you exhibit the kind of spiritual courage that we saw in Carol that day when we threw our arms around her.

Remember Naaman? Naaman followed the counsel of the prophet, and his leprosy was cured. We have a prophet today, and, if we will follow his counsel, we can cure our spiritual leprosy. The ten lepers went to the Savior and were cured. The message is clear: we need seek no other response to our spiritual afflictions. The Savior has bidden us to come unto him, for his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

I so testify to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.