

# *Stones in the Wall*

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Good morning, brothers and sisters. It's good to be with you. I consider it a rare privilege to be invited to speak at a BYU devotional. It has been some years since I last had this opportunity, and, realizing that it will likely not come again, I have struggled in an unusual way for guidance in selecting a subject and developing some thoughts that would do justice to your being here this morning. My prayers and pleadings have been many.

It seems to me that our needs and interests change as we pass through the different seasons of our life. As I have grown older and have experienced many of the needs that are common to every season, I have come to realize that each period has its own different and unique challenges.

I have also come to understand that there are many, many good things that matter in life and that as each one is pursued, our joy and happiness will increase. But because we can't do every needed thing all at once, we often get frustrated with our performance as we try to pick and choose our particular course of action. We often speak of "coming unto Christ," but we are not always sure just what that means or the path to pursue or the process we should follow. There are so many good choices to be made.

I have found the greatest challenge in life—regardless of the season you are in—is to find those things that really matter the most and put them on center stage in our lives and concentrate on their development. As we do this, unnumbered and unusual blessings begin to unfold.

When the most important things are attended to first, then all else that is really important in life will fall appropriately into place.

Most of us are busy doing a host of things that do matter in our lives; however, some of them are being done at the expense of other efforts that are even more important. The weightier matters are too often set aside to be attended to later. I have also found out that often the issues we face are not always decisions between right or wrong; they can be and often are between two right choices.

So first I will address the question of what does matter the most. To begin with, I would like to visit with those of you who have become discouraged in your personal prayers—the

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ones you say when no one else is listening. I'd like to visit with those of you who have stopped praying or who don't pray as frequently or as fervently as you once did. Perhaps you find it difficult to pray because you aren't sure the Lord is listening; maybe you aren't sure He is even there; or maybe you feel guilty or unworthy. But whatever the reason, your communication isn't what it ought to be—or what you would like it to be.

Have you ever knelt down alone and asked the Lord for something that is really important to you and then found that your prayer wasn't answered as you had hoped? I have. Have you ever prayed and prayed for days and days for something special, and then found that it didn't work out the way you had wanted? I have. In times past, on more than a few occasions, I have gotten up off my knees and wondered in despair, "What's the use? He isn't even listening," or "Maybe I just don't understand the signals."

A few years ago, after one such frustrating experience in prayer, I was reflecting on my experiences with my earthly father, who has been gone several years now. I remembered that when he was alive I could always go to him and talk to him about anything and he would listen to me. Even when I had made a mistake or had done something wrong he would listen. My dad was not a perfect man—though nearly so—but he would listen every time. Surely a perfect Father in Heaven would also listen—every time.

I want you to know that I know that whenever one of Heavenly Father's children kneels and talks to Him, He listens. I know this as well as I know anything in this world: Heavenly Father does listen to every prayer from His children. I know our prayers ascend to heaven. No matter what we may have done wrong, He listens to us. He hears our pleadings and cries for help.

Now I also believe He answers us. Often we forget that His timetable for answering and ours are not always the same. I do not

believe He ignores His children when they talk to Him. Often the problem in our communication with the Lord is that not all of us have learned how to listen for His answers—or perhaps we are not prepared to hear Him. I believe we receive His answers as we prepare ourselves to receive them.

Now let me explain this to you. Last month my wife and I went to the beautiful Lake District in northern England. There we saw some of the greenest lush meadows and hillsides in the world. They were very picturesque, with scores of white sheep contentedly grazing there. On these rolling hills we could see miles and miles of stone walls made of rock of all sizes and shapes—all held together without mortar. They looked like outlines in a giant puzzle. The walls were placed there hundreds of years ago, built by shepherders to separate their flocks and to identify their lands. We marveled at them.

As we go through life, some of us build a similar rock wall, as it were, between ourselves and heaven. This wall is usually made up of our uncorrected mistakes or of unrepented sins. For example, in our wall there may be stones of many different sizes and shapes. There could be stones placed there because we have been unkind to someone. Criticism of leaders or teachers may add another stone. A lack of forgiveness of others may place another. Vulgar thoughts and actions may deposit some rather large rocks in this wall. You may be sure dishonesty will set one in place, selfishness another, and so on. If we are not careful, this wall will develop into a very formidable barrier.

In spite of the wall we may have built between us and our Heavenly Father, our heartfelt cries do get through. However, when He sends His messages back to us, His inspiration often cannot penetrate this wall we have built around our hearts, and we suffer. We may even say, "He doesn't hear" or "He doesn't answer" or "He doesn't really care."

One of our greatest challenges in life is to destroy this wall stone by stone—or, if you please, to cleanse ourselves, to purify this inner vessel so that we can be in tune and receive His answers to our petitions for help.

We must also keep in mind that often He uses others as His helpers in taking care of our needs and answering our prayers. I have found that even at times when a great effort has been made toward cleansing and purifying this inner vessel, it is still possible on occasion to be frustrated in our efforts to communicate with heaven. I have learned much from my study of section 9 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The Lord's instruction to Oliver Cowdery is so clear as Oliver attempted to translate the Book of Mormon. Remember what the Lord told him:

*Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.*

*But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.*

*But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong.* [D&C 9:7–9]

On more than a few occasions I have put these instructions to the test and have had an abundance of positive experiences in the answers I have received. However, there have been those few times when I have drawn a complete blank. On those occasions it seemed that no matter which side of an issue I submitted for confirmation, I would get neither a positive nor a negative feeling. I couldn't figure it out nor understand why. Then some years ago I received a startling personal revelation. I was reading from one of President Brigham Young's talks found in the *Journal of Discourses*. Here was the answer I had been praying for. It let

me know I was not left alone in my request for help:

*If I ask Him to give me wisdom concerning any requirement in life, or in regard to my own course, or that of my friends, my family, my children, or those that I preside over, and get no answer from Him, and then do the very best that my judgment will teach me, He is bound to own and honor that transaction, and He will do so to all intents and purposes. [JD 3:205]*

So now I think I understand the process better than I did before. When I have studied it out in my mind and fervently prayed over the issue and still do not get the positive or negative feeling that I am looking for, then I just go ahead, using the best judgment my mind and heart can give me, and I have the assurance that the Lord will stand behind me and support me in the decision.

Now I would like to tell you some of my feelings about removing a couple of the larger stones that may be in your wall of spiritual resistance.

I suppose we have all had someone do something to us or say something to us that we didn't like, that made us angry. We can't forget it—and we may not even want to forget it. In other words, we are unforgiving. The Lord has had some very strong words to say to those of us who will not forgive one another. Remember those words in Doctrine and Covenants 64:8–10:

*My disciples, in days of old, sought occasion against one another and forgave not one another in their hearts; and for this evil they were afflicted and sorely chastened.*

*Wherefore, I say unto you, that ye ought to forgive one another; for he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the greater sin.*

*I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men.*

Many years ago I had one of my experiences in being unforgiving. I felt I had been taken advantage of, and I did not like the person. I did not want to be around him. I wouldn't talk to him unless I absolutely had to. Long after the issue should have been closed, it was still cankering my soul.

One day my wife—who is very astute and knows how to read me—said, “You don't like so-and-so, do you?”

“No, I don't,” I said, “but how could you tell?”

“Well, your feelings show when you are around him. It's in your countenance. It shows. Why don't you do something about it?” she asked.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Why don't you pray about it?”

I said, “Well, I did pray, and I still don't like him.”

“No,” she replied, “why don't you *really* pray about it?”

I thought, “How do you *really* pray about something?” Then I began to think, and I knew what she meant. So I decided that I was going to pray for a better feeling about this person until I had one. My spiritual life was on the line.

That night I got on my knees and prayed and tried to open up my heart to the Lord. But when I got up I still didn't care for that person. The next morning I knelt and prayed and tried again to have a feeling of goodness toward him, but when I finished, I didn't feel any different. This process continued for several weeks, with the same negative result. Every night and every morning I prayed, but finally I noticed that my prayers had turned to pleadings. I have found that pleading raises prayer to another level. It happens when you really open up your heart to the Lord and let Him see the real intent and purpose of your petition to Him—a petition based on a deep love for the Lord as well as for each one of His children.

I don't remember a specific time that it happened, but I do know that the time finally came when I knew that if I were asked to, I

could stand before the Lord and, at least in this instance, He would find that I had a forgiving heart.

The stone of unforgiveness needs to be removed by all of us. If it happens to be there, I suggest that persistent prayer and even pleading might be a way to remove it.

One of the stones that presents a very real problem for many is unworthy and unclean thoughts. Many are the stones that are placed in the wall between us and heaven because of vulgar thoughts and actions.

Remember the words of Moroni 10:30: “And again I would exhort you that ye would come unto Christ, and lay hold upon every good gift, and touch not the evil gift, nor the unclean thing.”

The very devil and the father of all lies has slyly and slowly lowered the social norms of morality to a tragic and destructive level. In magazines and books, on CDs and tapes, on our television, computer, and theater screens is portrayed more and more often a lifestyle that might even rival the excesses of those who lived in Sodom and Gomorrah. The screens, music, printed materials, etc., are filled with a profusion of sex, nudity, vulgarity, and foul language.

One of the great tragedies is that too many of us are watching and listening to this type of so-called entertainment. Some do it only casually at first. They think they are spiritually strong and will be immune to its influence. This trash is nothing more nor less than a gateway to pornography—one of the master deceiver's most effective products.

Part of the tragedy I speak of is that many do not recognize they are trapped or soon will be. Unfortunately I fear even some within the sound of my voice have an addiction and do not realize it. They see this as a form of entertainment that serves as a relief from the troubles of the day. In reality it is only relieving them of their spirituality and their capacity to draw on the powers of heaven in times of need.

We must come to understand fully the consequences of having an appetite for such trash. None of us here today can look at, read about, or listen to such explicit vulgarity, even in its mildest form, without bringing sorrow to a loving God and a terrible injury to one's own spirit. We cannot look at or listen to these unholy depictions without suffering the consequences—and those consequences are very real.

We must remember that our rewards for righteous living are only partially enjoyed in this mortal life. Likewise, our miseries for breaking the commandments of God will not all be realized fully as we live here on earth. Eternity is a long, long time.

Remember, our mind is a wonderful instrument. It will record and keep whatever we put into it: both trash and beauty. When we see or hear anything filthy or vulgar, whatever the source, our mind records it, and as it makes the filthy record, beauty and clean thoughts are pushed into the background. The brightness of hope and faith in Christ begin to fade and, more and more, turmoil and discontent become our companions. We are not as happy as we used to be. We find less peace and contentedness in our hearts and in our homes. We do things that later we wish we had not done.

Now, if you have this problem we speak of, if imbedded in the wall are desires or habits that keep heaven-sent messages from entering your heart, let me give you hope and help.

You may need to go to your spouse, your parents, or your bishop for help. Most certainly

each of us must go to the Lord. Stopping the activity and cleansing the spirit of the impurities of which we have been speaking will not be easy, and it will not be quick, but it can be sure. Let me repeat something I have said before:

The secret of cleansing the spirit of impurities is not very complicated. It begins with sincere, heartfelt prayer every morning and ends with prayer every night. This is the most important step I know in the process. It may simply be a prayer for strength to turn from bad habits or a prayer that sin will be distasteful to you.

Meanwhile, remember that not all prayers are answered the same day or even the next day. Sometimes it takes a long time. But with this step securely in place, I have seen hundreds of miracles take place. Without it, there is continued frustration, unhappiness, ineffectiveness, and despair. If you have tried and have given up, I plead with you to try again and again and again. Our Heavenly Father will not forsake your efforts if you sincerely persist. (See H. Burke Peterson, "Purify Our Minds and Spirits," *Ensign*, November 1980, 39; "Purify Your Thoughts," *Brigham Young University 1983–84 Fireside and Devotional Speeches* [Provo: BYU, 1984], 21; "Clean Thoughts, Pure Lives," *Ensign*, September 1984, 73; and "Touch Not the Evil Gift, Nor the Unclean Thing," *Ensign*, November 1993, 43–44.)

In closing, I testify to you, my dear friends and brothers and sisters, that there is a God in heaven who knows you, who loves you, and who will help you. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.