

"IF THOU WILT BE PERFECT . . ."

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One of the most obvious forms of Mormon adjustment to contemporary American society is our increasing acceptance of its economic doctrines and attitudes concerning the proper accumulation and uses of material wealth. Indeed, to many Mormons, free enterprise has become synonymous with free agency, to be as earnestly defended and occupying almost as important a place in our theology. Where once we likened ourselves to the City of Enoch and held inspired hopes of a society where all would share in the abundance of an earth in which "there is enough and to spare" (Doctrine and Covenants 104:17), we now have enslaved ourselves to the vain quest for material satisfaction.

In doing so, we have abandoned those less fortunate than ourselves to work out their own temporal salvation. Work has been enthroned not only as the basic law of economic accretion, but as the sure cure for every economic ailment regardless of circumstances, and programs which seem to infringe upon this principle are vigorously resisted out of a concern that they will destroy incentive and the desire to progress. We have become so concerned with the dangers of the means that we have forgotten the end. And all too often, our professed piety and devotions have been bought with the suffering of a fellow child of God.

When was the last time you passed a stranger in trouble on a lonely road and dark night, and though ridiculed by those who "don't want to get involved," had compassion, went to him and gave of your substance to take care of him? Or were you "a certain priest," hurrying to help prepare the sacrament in time for meeting and "passed by on the other side," or "a Levite" trying not to miss the 5:30 temple session so you could get home early enough to watch that favorite television show, and you "came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side" (Luke 10:30-37)?

How long has it been since we opened our hearts and our purses and personally found someone "an hungered, and gave him meat"? "thirsty, and gave him drink"? "a stranger, and took him in"? "naked, and clothed him"? "sick, and visited him"? "in prison, and went unto him"? Or, little knowing and less caring, have we fulfilled the prophecy of King Benjamin and said "The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him my food, nor impart unto him of my substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just" (Mosiah 4:17)? If so, well do we deserve the judgment King Benjamin pronounced — that "whosoever doeth this the same hath great cause to repent; and except

he repenteth of that which he hath done he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God" (Mosiah 4:18). We have forgotten that second only to loving God is the great commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:39). We have forgotten that "when ye are in the service of your fellow beings, ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2:17). And we have forgotten that it was Jesus of Nazareth who said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

It is ironic that we who claim to have the greatest program of care for the poor in all the world are yet many times the most guilty of turning our backs upon them. We are so busy working on our Sunday School lesson, sewing beautiful doilies for the Relief Society Bazaar, or reading out of the "best books" that we just don't have time for the poor. If we are forced to cross the railroad tracks on our way to meetings, we salve our conscience with "ye have the poor with you always" (Mark 14:7) and get back to concentrating on whether to charge one dollar or two for that MIA party or who is going to start at center in the next ward basketball game.

But I hear you complain, "Why talk to me of all this? I am not guilty of such sins, for I work on the stake farm, I donate each month to the fast offering, I give tithes of all that I possess, and I have a temple recommend to prove it!" I suggest to you that if God relied on our "voluntary contributions" to fulfill our gospel responsibility to the poor of the earth, let alone the members of the Church, their hopes for temporal salvation would be less than that of a fish in the desert. Just how willing are we to devote even one or two mornings a month to work on the stake farm? What percentage of Mormons pay a full or even partial tithe on their increase? And what kind of a meal could you provide for the average amount donated as a fast offering?

Along with this abandonment of the poor in our midst, we have come to exalt a gospel of material wealth. We have become the modern-day Calvinists, and the new car in the garage, the pool in the backyard, the color television in the living room are the sure signs that we are indeed God's Elect, His Chosen People.

Our eyes are focused on the horizon of an advancing stock market, our hearts are filled with the love of financial security, and our lives are dedicated to the proposition that success can be measured by the size of a salary. With joyful heart, we truly thank God for a profit. If the money-changers have not regained the temple, they have certainly recaptured the home. That many of our local leaders are not only financially secure, but also wealthy, reinforces the perverse idea in our own minds that one way to gain a reward in heaven is to make your own on earth.

In short, we have become an integral part of a society that is founded upon a theology of affluence. We today are part of a society that enjoys a family income of over \$8,000 a year, that owns sixty million automobiles, seventy million television sets, and over five hundred billion dollars worth of common stock. And we are part of this society while all around us, another society — an "Other America" — is dying on a dirt floor from disease

and exposure and chronic malnutrition. I say this is wrong, materially wrong, and more than that, it is a sin in the sight of God.

I believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ and the historical experience of His Church upon the earth demand something far different from this. I believe they suggest that free enterprise is not an essential part of the plan of salvation, that the profit motive is not one of the fundamental principles of the gospel, that the worth of an individual is not measured by the size of his securities portfolio. I believe they suggest that we are still our brother's keeper, that the only real service to God is service to man, and that earthly goods are given to be used, not to be collected and hoarded in the idolatry of wealth.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me make it clear that I fully accept the doctrine that men are to work for their economic substance in this life (D&C 42:42; 68:30), and that prosperity in that work will come as a result of living the gospel (D&C 38:39; Mosiah 2:22). Work has been a standing law of gospel economics from the time Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden (Moses 4:23-25) and prosperity is implicit in the divine command to gain dominion over the earth (Moses 2:28-29).

But nowhere in the gospel do I find any justification for the idea that work is the only acceptable method of economic accumulation when one has not been trained to work in a highly technical society or is deprived by circumstances beyond his control from doing so. Nowhere do I find justification for prosperity for one individual or group of people when another is living in hunger and poverty. And nowhere do I find justification for the fatal illusion that economic success is a mirror of spiritual progression.

On the contrary, the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims that work and resulting individual prosperity alone are not enough for men to live in economic accordance with the Divine Will. The motive for that work must also be a righteous one — not to accumulate material wealth as the final and supreme purpose of human activity, but only as a means to the great end of serving others in building the society of Zion upon the earth. To Jew and Nephite alike the Savior emphatically declared that men must set their hearts upon service to God alone and not on the riches of this world, for "no man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon" (Matthew 6:24; III Nephi 13:24).

If our chief concern in life is acquiring material wealth for our personal use, we cannot possibly obey even the first of the commandments given by God to the Children of Israel at Sinai: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). That which was meant to mirror the divine becomes instead an instrument of enslavement and delusion. Where once it was a path to God, it now leads us away from him, for "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (II Nephi 13:21), and we join the ranks of economic blasphemers whose "hearts are upon their treasures; wherefore, their treasure is their God" (II Nephi 9:30).

It is only when we reject this gospel of material wealth that we can begin

to achieve the Christ-like attitude of "every man seeking the interest of his neighbor, and doing all things with an eye single to the glory of God" (D&C 82:19). Then, and only then, can we respond with full heart to the admonition of Jacob:

And after ye have obtained a hope in Christ, ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good — to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted. (Jacob 2:19)

Much could be said of specific economic attitudes and practices present among us today that are opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The great danger of pride in financial success was so prevalent among the Nephite people that in warning our own dispensation about this attitude, the Lord said to "beware of pride, lest ye become as the Nephites of old" (D&C 38:39). How we in an affluent society should remember this when we are fortunate enough to share in such abundance, lest we too walk in the pride of our hearts and deny the source from whom all blessings flow.

Our standard of dress today is another good indication of our failure to obey the economic principles of the gospel. The gospel is specific in proclaiming that men — and women — are not to wear costly apparel (Jacob 2:13-14; Mormon 8:39). This admonition becomes even more important when coupled with a standard of modesty by the fact that the price of dresses seems to be inversely related to the quantity of material in the garment. The standard of dress recorded with approval by Alma was instead that righteous Nephites were "neat and comely," while avoiding the excesses of expensive clothing (Alma 1:27). For us today, the Lord has said "And again, thou shalt not be proud in thy heart; let all thy garments be plain, and their beauty the beauty of the work of thine own hands" (D&C 42:40). To any sisters who continue to maintain the need for a new and more expensive wardrobe each season, I commend Isaiah 3:16-24 for your individual reading under the hair-dryer.

But the dangers of pride in financial success, the wearing of costly apparel, and the equally insidious persecution by rich of poor in so many subtle ways could all be eliminated in society today if we would but adhere to one of the most basic economic doctrines of the gospel. Historically, a distinguishing feature of societies at their highest peak of spiritual progression is that there is relative economic equality, a lack of either rich or poor. The little information available about the Zion of Enoch indicates that "they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them" (Moses 7:18). In our own day, the Lord has said "It is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefore the world lieth in sin" (D&C 49:20), that "if ye are not equal in earthly things ye cannot be equal in obtaining heavenly things" (D&C 78:6), and that "in your temporal things you shall be equal, and this not grudgingly, otherwise the abundance of the manifestations of the Spirit shall be withheld" (D&C 70:14).

Following the visit of the resurrected Savior to this continent, "they had



all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift" (IV Nephi 3). In contrast to this economic equality, the Prophet Jacob condemned his people for sins arising out of the fact that "the hand of providence hath smiled upon you most pleasingly, that you have obtained many riches; and . . . some of you have obtained more abundantly than that of your brethren. . . ." (Jacob 2:13). The condition of "great inequality" in society was accounted a condition leading to unrighteousness by both Alma (Alma 4:12) and the Apostle Nephi (III Nephi 6:14). And a contributing cause of the apostasy of the Nephites after the golden age was that "they did have their goods and their substance no more common among them. And they began to be divided into classes" (IV Nephi 25-26).

On the basis of this scriptural record, I suggest to you that God does not now and never has intended for His people to be arranged, stratified, and separated into economic classes of rich and poor. He does not want one group to be lifted up above another on such an artificial classification, such a false measure of individual or group worth. Instead of allowing such classes to exist or even helping to establish and perpetuate them by our negative attitudes toward programs of economic redistribution, we of all people should be in the forefront of those seeking creative and gospel-oriented ways to bring about our own golden age of prosperity for all.

To those of us who are students, a special concern should be noted from the writings of the Apostle Nephi. He recorded that just prior to the visit of the Savior, the people were divided not only by stratification of wealth, but also "their chances for learning, yea, some were ignorant because of their poverty, and others did receive great learning because of their riches" (III Nephi 6:12). Well should those able to afford education today remember the disapproval of this type of dichotomy by Nephi, and work to provide the opportunity of learning for all God's children, regardless of their financial position — a position that usually is not even theirs through the criteria of being "earned" or "deserved" but is a mere accident of inheritance.

We must not conclude that perfect economic *uniformity* is essential. The chief concern of the gospel teachings is that a social and economic structure be achieved in which there are no rich and poor *classes*. This can be accomplished in society without having every house, every car, every set of clothing be the same. But there should be no separation of people or groups of people on the basis of wealth in society. All should have opportunity for the necessities and the comforts of life, and none should possess such an abundance that he becomes distinguished for that quality alone.

Equally as important in the gospel as the doctrine of economic equality is the method by which it is to be achieved — by the rich willingly imparting of their substance to the poor, for "this is the way that I, the Lord, have decreed to provide for my saints, that the poor shall be exalted, in that the rich are made low" (D&C 104:16). Among the teachings of the Savior in the eastern hemisphere is the remarkable story of the rich young ruler who, after living what must have been a life of exceptional obedience to the Mosaic law,

inquired of Jesus what he must do to obtain eternal life. The Savior's reply was meant specifically for that individual, but can well be taken as a pattern for all men: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me" (Matthew 19:21).

That the members of the Church in Jerusalem following the resurrection of Christ applied this principle is attested to by the fact that they "sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need" (Acts 2:45). To the Church in our dispensation, the Lord has said that "he that doeth not these things, the same is not my disciple" (D&C 52:40). And moreover, "if any man shall take of the abundance which I [the Lord] have made, and impart not his portion, according to the law of my gospel, unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment" (D&C 104:18).

The Book of Mormon also teaches that the imparting of material wealth by rich to the poor is a necessary characteristic of a righteous society. The Prophet Alma in particular commanded his people to "impart of their substance, every one according to that which he had; if he have more abundantly he should impart more abundantly; and of him that had but little, but little should be required; and to him that had not should be given" (Mosiah 18:27). The extent to which this was applied by Alma's followers should be of special interest to those of us who feel they have fulfilled their gospel responsibility to share by paying a grudging tithe or donating the monthly pittance we euphemistically call an offering:

And thus, in their prosperous circumstances, they did not send away any who were naked, or that were hungry, or that were athirst, or that were sick, or that had not been nourished; and they did not set their hearts upon riches; therefore they were liberal to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, whether out of the church or in the church, having no respect to persons as to those who stood in need. (Alma 1:30)

The extreme importance of this principle to our own salvation can be shown in the statement of Benjamin that imparting of one's substance to the poor is necessary "for the sake of retaining a remission of your sins from day to day" (Mosiah 4:26); in Amulek's testimony that to one who fails to do this "your prayer is vain, and availeth you nothing, and ye are as hypocrites who do deny the faith" (Alma 34:28); and in the Prophet Nephi's word that sharing of wealth is a necessary element of the great attribute of charity, for "if they should have charity they would not suffer the laborer in Zion to perish" (II Nephi 26:30). To those who fail to abide by this principle, the consequences are that they "shall be hewn down and cast into the fire except they speedily repent" (Alma 5:56), and that "the sword of vengeance hangeth over you; and the time soon cometh that he [God] avengeth the blood of the saints upon you, for he will not suffer their cries any longer" (Mormon 8:41).

One can only conclude from a comparison of these gospel teachings with our present attitudes and practices that many of us today are living in gross

economic apostasy, as surely lacking in the stuff saints are made of as those we condemn in our smug self-satisfaction for other forms of apostasy. The voice of God's prophets from Enoch to David O. McKay cries out to us with Peter, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19), for God will not be mocked!

It is a tragic irony of history that we bear witness of a Prophet of God who proclaimed, "I intend to lay a foundation that will revolutionize the whole world,"<sup>1</sup> when we today are numbered among the exponents of many of the very social and economic attitudes and conditions he condemned. And it is a self-condemning testament in hypocrisy when we now sustain as an Apostle of Jesus Christ a man who has said, "The Church is a continuing revolution against any and all norms of society that fall below the gospel standards,"<sup>2</sup> and yet we consciously and deliberately choose to fall below those standards by adopting and defending society's unrighteous norms. Well one might echo the words of Orson Pratt, spoken so many years ago but still so applicable today:

How much longer will this continue? How long will every family be for themselves, every man's energy and ability be exerted only for himself and his family, every man grasping to enrich himself? When do you see a rich man among the Latter-day Saints who, when he makes a great feast, invites the poor and the lame, the halt and the blind, and those who are in destitute circumstances? What kind of a revolution would it work among the Latter-day Saints if the revelation given in March, 1831, were carried out by them — "It is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefore the world lieth in sin"? How much of a revolution would it accomplish in Salt Lake City if this order of things should be brought about? I think it would work a greater revolution among this people than has ever been witnessed amongst them since they had an existence as a Church.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Joseph Fielding Smith, ed (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News Press, 1942), p. 366.

<sup>2</sup>Elder Harold B. Lee, *Conference Report*, April 1966, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup>*Journal of Discourses* (London, 1873), Vol. 15, pp. 355-56.