

Paul's Talk, Mother's Day 2022

That music was sweet!

Good morning, fellow sinners. And to the rest of you, Happy Mother's Day!

Brother Rollins asked us to speak on "How do I know that God has forgiven me," and I told him that when I figure that out, then I can talk about it. He thought we should go ahead and speak anyway. Probably because he's confident that Nicki knows what she's talking about.

So let's get going, with a leading authority on gospel matters. J. Golden Kimball observed, "What can God do for a liar who refuses to repent? Can the Lord save him? He can't claim salvation. Baptizing him in water will not settle the trouble, unless you keep him under."

I don't know what that means, but it does seem as if Elder Kimball is saying that people can go through the outward motions of doing what's right, but if they're still rotten inside then no amount of outward righteousness is going to do much for them eternally.

Who is known for being really big on the letter of the law, on looking good, and on expecting others to be just so? How about the Pharisees? Yes, and we'll get to them, but it's a bigger problem than behavior at just one point in time. Indeed, back in Isaiah that prophet laments those who pronounce their righteousness but misplace their priorities. Isaiah 58 says:

1 Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.

2 Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God.

3 Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours.

4 Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high.

5 Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? [Now, sisters and brothers, think of “fast” in this sense not just as something people do once a month while filling out a fast offering check for the deacons to pick up, but as a more general approach to life].

6 Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

7 Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

8 Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy rearward.

9 Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity;

10 And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday:

11 And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

12 And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.

That’s Old Testament times. Too many people not understanding what really brings us close to God. In the Book of Mormon we have the Nephites, and the Zoramites. What about people in our time?

Oh, that's harder to talk about. Because we like to imagine that there are righteous people, and wicked people, and that we're the former. But, as John observed, "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." And as Hugh Nibley said, "the worst sinners, according to Jesus, are not the harlots and publicans, but the religious leaders with their insistence on proper dress and grooming, their careful observance of all the rules, their precious concern for status symbols, their strict legality, their pious patriotism. Longhairs, beards, necklaces, LSD and rock, Big Sur and Woodstock come and go, but Babylon is always there: rich, respectable, immovable, with its granite walls and steel vaults, its bronze gates, its onyx trimmings and marble floors..." Certainly we should remember Elder Uchtdorf's caution against judging others just because they sin differently than we do. It's beginning to look like there are whited sepulchres everywhere we look, including in the mirror!

And in New Testament times, there's Luke 15. In this chapter, the Pharisees and the scribes are all worked up because Jesus is hanging out with shady characters who don't meet their high standards. People they would never associate with. Publicans and other sinners. The horror! The religious leaders murmur mightily. Jesus responds with three parables.

The first is the parable of the parable of the lost sheep. A shepherd left the ninety and nine and went out to find one sheep that was lost, and great was the joy when he found the lost sheep. The second is the parable of the lost coin. A woman had ten pieces of silver, lost one of them, and searched the house until she found it, and there was much rejoicing. These are parables about how everyone is important. The third is the parable of the prodigal son. We all know that story. There were parents who had two sons, and one was dutiful but the other was a scalawag. The second son went off to riotous living, then fell into poverty and misery, and then came dragging himself home. His parents were so glad to see him that they had a feast for him. His brother wasn't happy, he was incensed! How could the utterly undeserving son get such grand treatment?

I used to really dislike this story. When I was young, and full of zeal without knowledge (now I have neither), I believed in hell more than in heaven, and thought it quite important that people pay for their sins, and I was very enamored with the idea of justice. The story in this parable seemed unfair, and I

sympathized with the outrage of the good son. But not anymore. And perhaps herein lies the answer to the question we're supposed to talk about.

We know we're not supposed to be skanky, and we're also not supposed to confuse culture with the gospel—what are we supposed to be doing? If our outward shows won't save us, and inwardly we're all falling short, is there any hope for us if we aren't perfect?

At this point in my life I am well aware that I am unworthy to look upon the face of Jesus. I would feel terribly awkward walking up to my Heavenly Parents. I desperately want justice to not rob mercy.

Now, I'm not a child of perdition; none of us here are. We are all various amounts of good and bad. I have an inkling that not even the best of us are going to be translated directly up to heaven before Sunday dinner. But we are going to go upstairs someday, through death, and we ought to give careful thought to whether at that point we really want to get what we deserve, because that could be unpleasant. Indeed, because we are not as pure in heart as we could and should be, then according to a legalistic, Pharisaical view we are all, as the Canadians put it, hosed. We are all in deep trouble. Unless there is grace.

Grace is what we get, that we don't deserve. Let us remember what Sister Okazaki said about the Savior:

Well, my dear sisters, the gospel is the good news that can free us from guilt. We know that Jesus experienced the totality of mortal existence in Gethsemane. It's our faith that he experienced everything—absolutely everything. Sometimes we don't think through the implications of that belief. We talk in great generalities about the sins of all humankind, about the suffering of the entire human family. But we don't experience pain in generalities. We experience it individually. That means He knows what it felt like when your mother died of cancer—how it was for your mother, how it still is for you. He knows what it felt like to lose the student body election. He knows that moment when the brakes locked and the car started to skid. He experienced the slave ship sailing from Ghana.... He experienced the gas chambers at Dachau. He experienced napalm in Vietnam. He knows about drug addiction and alcoholism.

Let me go further. There is nothing you have experienced as a woman that he does not also know and recognize. On a profound level, he understands the hunger to hold your baby that sustains you through pregnancy. He understands both the physical pain of giving birth and the immense joy. He knows about PMS and cramps and menopause.... He understands your mother-pain when your five-year-old leaves for kindergarten, when a bully picks on your fifth-grader.... He knows your mother-rage when a trusted babysitter...abused your two-year-old, when someone gives your thirteen-year-old drugs, when someone seduces your seventeen-year-old. He knows the pain you live with when you come home to a quiet apartment where the only children are visitors, when you hear that your former husband and his new wife were sealed in the temple last week, when your fiftieth wedding anniversary rolls around and your husband has been dead for two years. He knows all that. He's been there. He's been lower than all that. He's not waiting for us to be perfect. Perfect people don't need a Savior. He came to save his people in their imperfections. He is the Lord of the living, and the living make mistakes. He's not embarrassed by us, angry at us, or shocked. He wants us in our brokenness, in our unhappiness, in our guilt and our grief.... We need Him, and He is ready to come to us, if we'll open the door and let Him.

Who thinks that Jesus doesn't love us? He loves us more than we can even imagine. He did not go through all that so that He could then reject us. He went through that so He can better help us. His is a theology of liberation, and liberation leads to joy.

What about that parable of the prodigal son? When the son came home with his tail between his legs, his parents threw him a great feast. Did they care about what he had done? I'm sure it made them sad, as opposed to mad. There are many things in life to think and feel, but as Paul said the greatest of these is love. Good parents love their children and dearly want their children to be happy, and are so relieved when their children make it back from troublesome choices. Our Heavenly Parents dearly want us to be happy. Parables are parables, and this story is in part about us returning home to them, regardless of where we have been.

We do hear about the bar of judgment. There are different ideas on what happens there. Father Guido Sarducci advanced an accounting theory of the atonement, which isn't so different from what we sometimes hear in church. He thought that we are paid a certain amount every day we live, and then at the judgment we have to pay for our sins. So many dollars for this sin, more for that one. We'd better have a surplus at the end, or else! Or perhaps there's a ledger there, where all our sins are listed, and the ones we repent of are erased. There had better be blank pages when we get there!

I don't actually think our Heavenly Parents care about our sins as much as about the things we do right. What matters are acts of kindness. What matters is us stretching ourselves to serve others. What matters is that it sinks in to our heads that we don't have to wait until the next life to see Jesus, because He's right here on earth right now. He is where He always was, in the faces of the suffering. In the guy shuffling down the street wondering where he can get a job. In the woman with crank bugs, sitting on a grate in pain and despair. He is with the same people He was always with, the people in hovels and on sickbeds, where He is comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.

If those are the same places we're going to also, then maybe we shouldn't worry so much about whether we are forgiven by God. We ought to worry about whether we've repented and made changes after hurting each other. But grace will always be there, and will carry us home. Grace is not just for the very elect. Do we even have to know that the Church is the only true church, and have an unquestioning testimony, to get onto the path of eternal progression? Think about the example Mark shared when he wrote about the man who came to Jesus, and said: "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief!" Do we need perfect knowledge, perfect behavior? No. We just have to try. And if we do, we will gain His image in our countenance. It won't matter how we appear to others, because Jesus will see His reflection in us, and will know what we are becoming.

I don't even know if there is a literal bar of judgement. A homecoming isn't an inquisition. It seems more likely that there will be a place where our Parents and our Brother greet us and enfold us in their arms. And at that point, I testify that it's all good.

Sisters of the 14th Ward, on this Mother's Day I also testify that you are already amazing! And half of our ward's missionary force are sister missionaries. Super wonderful amazing! Thank you for your examples. I pray that we will all have faith that through our crescendos and diminuendos, the Spirit will guide us in making our lives part of the song of redeeming love. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.