

Episode 11

Stories from General Conference

KINDNESS

NARRATOR: This episode of “Stories from General Conference” is on the topic of kindness. An ancient fable by Aesop introduces this topic.

The North Wind boasted of great strength. The Sun argued that there was great power in gentleness. "We shall have a contest," said the Sun.

Far below, a man traveled a winding road. He was wearing a warm winter coat.

"As a test of strength," said the Sun, "Let us see which of us can take the coat off of that man."

"It will be quite simple for me to remove his coat," bragged the Wind.

The Wind blew so hard, the world was filled with dust and leaves. But the harder the wind blew, the tighter the shivering man clung to his coat.

Then, the Sun came out from behind a cloud. Sun warmed the air and the frosty ground. The man on the road unbuttoned his coat. He soon took off his coat and sat down in a shady spot.

"How did you do that?" asked the Wind.

"It was easy," said the Sun, "Through kindness and gentleness."

Kindness and gentleness usually influences much better than being vindictive. President Thomas S. Monson begins with a personal incident from his boyhood illustrating this point. This story was told in the October 1998 General Conference.

(President Thomas S. Monson, Priesthood Session, April 2000)

When I was a deacon, I loved baseball. In fact, I still do. I had a fielder's glove inscribed with the name *Mel Ott*. He was the premier player of my day. My friends and I would play ball in a small alleyway behind the houses where we lived. Our playing field was cramped, but all right, provided you hit straightaway to center field. However, if you hit the ball to the right of center, disaster was at the door. Here lived Mrs. Shinas, who, from her kitchen window, would watch us play; and as soon as the ball rolled to her porch, her large dog would retrieve the ball and present it to her as she opened the door. Into her

house Mrs. Shinas would return and add the ball to the many she had previously confiscated. She was our nemesis, the destroyer of our fun--even the bane of our existence. None of us had a good word for Mrs. Shinas, but we had plenty of bad words for her. None of us would speak to her, and she never spoke to us. She was hampered by a stiff leg which impaired her walking and must have caused her great pain. She and her husband had no children, lived secluded lives, and rarely came out of their house.

This private war continued for some time--perhaps two years--and then an inspired thaw melted the ice of winter and brought a springtime of good feelings to the stalemate.

One evening as I performed my daily task of watering our front lawn, holding the nozzle of the hose in the hand as was the style at that time, I noticed that Mrs. Shinas's lawn was dry and beginning to turn brown. I honestly don't know, brethren, what came over me, but I took a few more minutes and, with our hose, watered her lawn. I continued to do this throughout the summer, and then when autumn came I hosed her lawn free of leaves as I did ours and stacked the leaves in piles at the street's edge to be gathered. During the entire summer I had not seen Mrs. Shinas. We boys had long since given up playing ball in the alleyway. We had run out of baseballs and had no money to buy more.

Early one evening, Mrs. Shinas's front door opened, and she beckoned for me to jump the small fence and come to her front porch. This I did. As I approached her, she invited me into her living room, where I was asked to sit in a comfortable chair. She treated me to cookies and milk. Then she went to the kitchen and returned with a large box filled with baseballs and softballs, representing several seasons of her confiscation efforts. The filled box was presented to me. The treasure, however, was not to be found in the gift but rather in her words. I saw for the first time a smile come across the face of Mrs. Shinas, and she said, "Tommy, I want you to have these baseballs, and I want to thank you for being kind to me." I expressed my own gratitude to her and walked from her home a better boy than when I entered. No longer were we enemies. Now we were friends. The Golden Rule had again succeeded.

NARRATOR: Sometimes natural impulses would cause us to react in unkind ways. In the October 2001 General Conference, Elder Wayne S. Peterson related a personal example of how reversing this impulse paid off in a simple but memorable way.

(Elder Wayne S Peterson, October 2001, Sunday Afternoon Session)

Many years ago, while on vacation with my family, I had an experience that taught me a great lesson. On a Saturday, my wife and I decided to take the children for a drive and to do some shopping. During the drive the children fell asleep, and not wanting to wake them, I volunteered to stay in the car while my wife ran into the store.

While waiting, I glanced at the car parked in front of me. It was full of children, and they were looking at me. My eyes caught the eyes of a small boy, six or seven years old. As our eyes met, he immediately stuck his tongue out at me.

My first reaction was to stick my tongue out at him. I thought, *What have I done to deserve this?* Fortunately, before I reacted, I remembered a principle taught in general conference the week before by Elder Marvin J. Ashton (see Conference Report, Oct. 1970, 36–38; or *Improvement Era*, Dec. 1970, 59–60). He taught how important it was to act instead of react to the events around us. So I waved at the little boy. He stuck his tongue out at me again. I smiled and waved again. This time he waved back.

Soon he was joined in his enthusiastic waving by a little brother and sister. I responded by waving this way and that until my arm became tired. Then I rested it on the steering wheel and continued with every creative wave I could muster, all the time hoping their parents would quickly return or that my wife would soon come back.

The parents finally did come, and as they pulled away, my newfound friends continued to wave for as long as I could see them.

That was a simple experience, but it demonstrated that in most encounters we can *determine* the kind of experience we are going to have by how we respond. I was grateful that I chose to act in a friendly way rather than react to my young friend's childish behavior. In doing so I avoided the negative feelings I would have felt had I followed my natural instinct.

NARRATOR:

Kindness is an individual choice. But when many individuals choose kindness and act together, the result can be manifest in an impressive way. In the October 1998 General Conference, President Thomas S. Monson told the following story.

(President Thomas S. Monson, Saturday Morning, October 1998)

The teenage years can be difficult for the teens themselves as well as for their parents. These are trying times in the life of a boy or a girl. Each boy wants to make the football team; each girl wants to be the beauty queen. "Many are called, but few are chosen" could have an application here.

Let me share with you a modern-day miracle which occurred a year or so ago at Murray High School near Salt Lake City, where every person was a winner, and not a loser was to be found.

A newspaper article highlighted the event. It was entitled "Homecoming Shows True Spirit: Students Elect 2 Disabled Girls to Murray Royalty." The article began, "Ted and Ruth Eyre did what any parents would do. When their daughter, Shellie, became a finalist for Murray High School homecoming queen, they counseled her to be a good sport in case she didn't win. They explained only one girl among the 10 would be selected queen. . . . As student body officers crowned the school's homecoming [royalty] in the school gym Thursday night, Shellie Eyre experienced, instead, inclusion. The 17-year-old senior, born with Down syndrome, was selected by fellow students as homecoming queen. . . . As Ted Eyre escorted his daughter onto the gym floor as the candidates were

introduced, the gym erupted into deafening cheers and applause. They were greeted with a standing ovation."

Similar standing ovations were extended to Shellie's attendants, one of whom, April Perschon, has physical and mental disabilities resulting from a brain hemorrhage suffered when she was just 10 years old.

When the ovations had ceased, the school vice principal, Glo Merrill, said, "'Tonight . . . the students voted on inner beauty.' . . . Obviously moved, parents, school administrators and students wept openly." Said one student, "I'm so happy, I cried when they came out. I think Murray High is so awesome to do this."

I extend a heartfelt "thank you" to one and all who made this night one ever to be remembered. The Scottish poet James Barrie's words seem appropriate: "God gave us memories, that we might have June roses in the December of our lives."

NARRATOR: Acts of kindness are indeed Christ like, and are often acknowledged with displays of gratitude. In the October 1998 General Conference, President Thomas S. Monson illustrated this with a memorable story that once appeared in a newspaper.

(President Thomas S. Monson, Saturday Morning Session, October 1998)

The beauty and eloquence of an expression of gratitude is reflected in a newspaper story of some years ago:

The District of Columbia police auctioned off about 100 unclaimed bicycles Friday. "One dollar," said an 11-year-old boy as the bidding opened on the first bike. The bidding, however, went much higher. "One dollar," the boy repeated hopefully each time another bike came up.

The auctioneer, who had been auctioning stolen or lost bikes for 43 years, noticed that the boy's hopes seemed to soar higher whenever a racer-type bicycle was put up.

Then there was just one racer left. The bidding went to eight dollars. "Sold to that boy over there for nine dollars!" said the auctioneer. He took eight dollars from his own pocket and asked the boy for his dollar. The youngster turned it over in pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters--took his bike, and started to leave. But he went only a few feet. Carefully parking his new possession, he went back, gratefully threw his arms around the auctioneer's neck, and cried.

When was the last time we felt gratitude as deeply as did this boy? The deeds others perform in our behalf might not be as poignant, but certainly there are kind acts that warrant our expressions of gratitude.

NARRATOR:

In the April 2005 General Conference, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin told a story that occurred many years ago. Threats to health and even life were ignored in order to perform acts of compassion and kindness.

(Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin, Saturday Afternoon, April 2005)

If you are criticizing others, you are weakening the Church. If you are building others, you are building the kingdom of God. As Heavenly Father is kind, we also should be kind to others.

Elder James E. Talmage, a man who is remembered for his doctrinal teachings, showed great kindness to a neighbor family in distress. They were complete strangers to him. Before he was an Apostle, as a young father, he became aware of great suffering at a neighbor's home whose large family was stricken with the dreaded diphtheria. He did not care that they were not members of the Church; his kindness and charity moved him to act. The Relief Society was desperately trying to find people to help, but no one would because of the contagious nature of the disease.

When he arrived, James found one toddler already dead and two others who were in agony from the disease. He immediately went to work, cleaning the untidy house, preparing the young body for burial, cleaning and providing for the other sick children, spending the entire day doing so. He came back the next morning to find that one more of the children had died during the night. A third child was still suffering terribly. He wrote in his journal: "She clung to my neck, oftentimes coughing [germs] on my face and clothing, . . . yet I could not put her from me. During the half hour immediately preceding her death, I walked the floor with the little creature in my arms. She died in agony at 10 a.m." The three children had all departed within the space of 24 hours. He then assisted the family with the burial arrangements and spoke at their graveside services. This he did all for a family of strangers. What a great example of Christ like kindness!

NARRATOR:

Another story that occurred many years ago was told by Elder Don R. Clark in the October 2006 General Conference. It points out that we do not need to hold high position, or even have good health to provide acts of service and kindness. All we need is to open ourselves to the inspiration of Heaven.

(Elder Don R. Clarke, Sunday Afternoon, October 2006)

My maternal grandfather, Alma Benjamin Larsen, was only 34 years old when he woke up one morning and noticed that he had problems seeing. Shortly thereafter, he lost his sight entirely. Grandfather had served a mission and been a faithful member of the Church. He was a farmer with a wife and three children, and he could not imagine life without sight. Grandfather's wife and small children now had to bear the extra burdens of helping on the farm, and money became tight.

During this time of physical darkness, many people became instruments in God's hands to help my blind grandfather. One experience that had a powerful impact on his family happened in 1919. It was a year of great financial difficulty for all the people in Grandfather's town. Farms were being foreclosed, and businesses were going broke. There was a sizable mortgage on his farm, and Grandfather received a statement saying he would have to pay \$195 in order to carry the mortgage over for another year. For him, paying this bill was like demanding a pound of flesh. Nearly everyone was in the same condition, and it seemed impossible to obtain that much money. If he had gathered everything that the farm produced—the horses, cows, and machinery—he could not have sold them for \$195. Grandfather asked a neighbor to butcher two or three of his cows, and he sold them and some other products. He had extended credit to his neighbors with the understanding that they would pay at the end of the year, but none of his debtors was able to pay him. The economic situation for his family was bleak.

In his journal, Grandfather recounts: "I shall never forget that cold evening, just before Christmas of 1919. It looked as though we would lose the farm. My daughter, Gladys, laid a slip of paper in my hand and said, 'This came in the mail today.' I took it to her mother and asked her what it was. This is what my wife read to me, 'Dear Brother Larsen, I've had you on my mind all day today. I am wondering if you are in financial trouble. If you are, I have \$200 you may have.' The letter was signed 'Jim Drinkwater.' Jim was a small, crippled man, and he would have been the last man on earth that anyone would have thought had that much money on hand. I went to his house that night and he said, 'Brother Larsen, I received a wireless message from heaven this morning, and I could not get you off my mind all day. I was sure you were in financial trouble.' Brother Drinkwater gave me \$200 and we sent the \$195 to the mortgage company, and with the extra \$5 we bought boots and clothes for the children. Santa Claus did come that year."

My grandfather then goes on to bear his testimony: "The Lord has never let me down. He has touched the hearts of others as He touched the heart of Brother Drinkwater. I bear witness that the only safety and security that I have ever found has come through trying to keep the commandments of the Lord and upholding and sustaining the authorities of this Church."

I have thought about Jim Drinkwater many times and wondered how he came to be one that the Lord could trust. Jim was a little, crippled man that God trusted to help a blind farmer with a heavy mortgage and three children. I have learned a great deal from my grandfather's experience with Jim Drinkwater. I have learned that a person does not need to have a Church calling, an invitation to help someone, or even good health to become an instrument in God's hands. How then do you and I become instruments in God's hands? The prophets and the scriptures teach us how.

NARRATOR:

This series of stories concludes with another incident about the kindness of a stranger related by President Thomas S. Monson in the April 2001 General Conference. This story is a modern-day application of the Biblical account we know as "The Good Samaritan."

(President Thomas S. Monson, Saturday Morning, April 2001)

Genuine gratitude was expressed by the writer of a letter received some time ago at Church headquarters. No return address was shown, no name, but the postmark was from Portland, Oregon:

"To the Office of the First Presidency:

"Salt Lake City showed me Christian hospitality once during my wandering years.

"On a cross-country journey by bus to California, I stepped down in the terminal in Salt Lake City, sick and trembling from aggravated loss of sleep caused by a lack of necessary medication. In my headlong flight from a bad situation in Boston, I had completely forgotten my supply.

"In the Temple Square Hotel restaurant, I sat dejectedly. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a couple approach my table. 'Are you all right, young man?' the woman asked. I raised up, crying and a bit shaken, related my story and the predicament I was in then. They listened carefully and patiently to my nearly incoherent ramblings, and then they took charge. They spoke with the restaurant manager, then told me I could have all I wanted to eat there for five days. They took me next door to the hotel desk and got me a room for five days. Then they drove me to a clinic and saw that I was provided with the medications I needed—truly my basic lifeline to sanity and comfort.

"While I was recuperating and building my strength, I made it a point to attend the daily Tabernacle organ recitals. The celestial voicing of that instrument from the faintest intonation to the mighty full organ is the most sublime sonority of my acquaintance. I have acquired albums and tapes of the Tabernacle organ and the choir which I can rely upon any time to soothe and buttress a sagging spirit.

"On my last day at the hotel, before I resumed my journey, I turned in my key; and there was a message for me from that couple: 'Repay us by showing gentle kindness to some other troubled soul along your road.' That was my habit, but I determined to be more keenly on the lookout for someone who needed a lift in life.

"I wish you well. I don't know if these are indeed the 'latter days' spoken of in the scriptures, but I do know that two members of your church were saints to me in my desperate hours of need. I just thought you might like to know."

What an example of caring compassion.

NARRATOR:

Small doses of kindness dispensed by the giver can bring great healing to the receiver, and both are blessed. This has been “Stories from General Conference” on the topic of kindness. Thank you for listening to the Mormon Channel.