

The Celestial Nature of Self-reliance

October 1982 General Conference

Brothers and sisters, I have been asked to speak in so many of these welfare meetings that I'm beginning to feel that I ought to respond in a manner similar to a grandfather I once knew who was getting along in years and some people thought he didn't know when to quit talking. At a ward gathering they thought they shouldn't call on him because he would speak too long. Their final decision was, however, that they couldn't pass him by, so they called on him and asked him to stand and tell them in just a word how they could live to be as old as he was and still be of service. So he got up and said, "Keep breathing." I won't be that brief, but I will attempt to be to the point.

I love the simple truths contained in the welfare principles as taught by all the holy prophets since the world began, and I never tire of speaking about them. Today I shall speak to you about the principle of self-reliance and its impact upon our spiritual development.

Since the beginning of time man has been counseled to earn his own way, thereby becoming self-reliant. It is easy to understand the reason why the Lord places so much emphasis on this principle when we come to understand that it is tied very closely to freedom itself.

On this subject, Elder Albert E. Bowen said, "The Lord must want and intend that His people shall be free of constraint whether enforceable or only arising out of the bindings of conscience. ... That is why the Church is not satisfied with any system which leaves able people permanently dependent, and insists, on the contrary, that the true function and office of giving, is to help people [get] into a position where they can help themselves and thus be free." (*The Church Welfare Plan*, Gospel Doctrine manual, 1946, p. 77.)

Many programs have been set up by well-meaning individuals to aid those who are in need. However, many of these programs are designed with the shortsighted objective of "helping people," as opposed to "helping people help themselves." Our efforts must always be directed toward making able-bodied people self-reliant.

I clipped the following article from the *Reader's Digest* some time ago and have told it before, but it bears repeating. It reads:

"In our friendly neighbor city of St. Augustine great flocks of sea gulls are starving amid plenty. Fishing is still good, but the gulls don't know how to fish. For generations they have depended on the shrimp fleet to toss them scraps from the nets. Now the fleet has moved. ...

"The shrimpers had created a Welfare State for the ... sea gulls. The big birds never bothered to learn how to fish for themselves and they never taught their children to fish. Instead they led their little ones to the shrimp nets.

“Now the sea gulls, the fine free birds that almost symbolize liberty itself, are starving to death because they gave in to the ‘something for nothing’ lure! They sacrificed their independence for a handout.

“A lot of people are like that, too. They see nothing wrong in picking delectable scraps from the tax nets of the U.S. Government’s ‘shrimp fleet.’ But what will happen when the Government runs out of goods? What about our children of generations to come?

“Let’s not be gullible gulls. We ... must preserve our talents of self-sufficiency, our genius for creating things for ourselves, our sense of thrift and our true love of independence.” (“Fable of the Gullible Gull,” *Reader’s Digest*, Oct. 1950, p. 32.)

The practice of coveting and receiving unearned benefits has now become so fixed in our society that even men of wealth, possessing the means to produce more wealth, are expecting the government to guarantee them a profit. Elections often turn on what the candidates promise to do for voters from government funds. This practice, if universally accepted and implemented in any society, will make slaves of its citizens.

We cannot afford to become wards of the government, even if we have a legal right to do so. It requires too great a sacrifice of self-respect and in political, temporal, and spiritual independence.

In some countries it is extremely difficult to separate earned from unearned benefits. However, the principle is the same in all countries: We should strive to become self-reliant and not depend on others for our existence.

Governments are not the only guilty parties. We fear many parents in the Church are making “gullible gulls” out of their children with their permissiveness and their doling out of [family](#) resources. Parents who place their children on the dole are just as guilty as a government which places its citizens on the dole. In fact, the actions of parents in this area can be more devastating than any government program.

Bishops and other priesthood leaders can be guilty of making “gullible gulls” out of their ward members. Some members become financially or emotionally dependent on their bishops. A dole is a dole whatever its source. All of our Church and family actions should be directed toward making our children and members self-reliant. We can’t always control government programs, but we can control our own homes and congregations. If we will teach these principles and live them, we can do much to counter the negative effects which may exist in government programs in any country.

We know there are some who for no reason of their own cannot become self-reliant. President Henry D. Moyle had these people in mind when he said:

“This great principle does not deny to the needy nor to the poor the assistance they should have. The wholly incapacitated, the aged, the sickly are cared for with all tenderness, but every able-bodied person is enjoined to do his utmost for himself to avoid dependence, if his own efforts

can make such a course possible; to look upon adversity as temporary; to combine his faith in his own ability with honest toil; to rehabilitate himself and his family to a position of independence; in every case to minimize the need for help and to supplement any help given with his own best efforts.

“We believe [that] seldom [do circumstances arise in which] men of rigorous faith, genuine courage, and unfaltering determination, with the love of independence burning in their hearts, and pride in their own accomplishments, cannot surmount the obstacles that lie in their paths.

“We know that through humble, prayerful, industrious, God-fearing lives, a faith can be developed within us by the strength of which we can call down the blessings of a kind and merciful Heavenly Father and literally see our handicaps vanish and our independence and freedom established and maintained.” (In Conference Report, Apr. 1948, p. 5.)

Self-reliance is not the end, but a means to an end. It is very possible for a person to be completely independent and lack every other desirable attribute. One may become wealthy and never have to ask anyone for anything, but unless there is some spiritual goal attached to this independence, it can canker his soul.

The [welfare program](#) is spiritual. In 1936, when the program was introduced, President David O. McKay made this astute observation:

“The development of our spiritual nature should concern us most. Spirituality is the highest acquisition of the soul, the divine in man; ‘the supreme, crowning gift that makes him king of all created things.’ It is the consciousness of victory over self and of communion with the infinite. It is spirituality alone which really gives one the best in life.

“It is something to supply clothing to the scantily clad, to furnish ample food to those whose table is thinly spread, to give activity to those who are fighting desperately the despair that comes from enforced idleness, but after all is said and done, the greatest blessings that will accrue from the Church [welfare program] are spiritual. Outwardly, every act seems to be directed toward the physical: re-making of dresses and suits of clothes, canning fruits and vegetables, storing foodstuffs, choosing of fertile fields for settlement—all seem strictly temporal, but permeating all these acts, inspiring and sanctifying them, is the element of spirituality.” (In Conference Report, Oct. 1936, p. 103.)

In the [Doctrine and Covenants](#) we read:

“Wherefore, verily I say unto you that all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal; neither any man, nor the children of men; neither Adam, your father, whom I created.

“Behold, I gave unto him that he should be an agent unto himself; and I gave unto him commandment, but no temporal commandment gave I unto him, for my commandments are spiritual.” ([D&C 29:34–35](#).)

This scripture tells us there is no such thing as a temporal commandment. It also tells us that man is to be “an agent unto himself.” Man cannot be an agent unto himself if he is not self-reliant. Herein we see that independence and self-reliance are critical keys to our spiritual growth. Whenever we get into a situation which threatens our self-reliance, we will find our freedom threatened as well. If we increase our dependence, we will find an immediate decrease in our freedom to act.

Thus far, we should have learned that self-reliance is a prerequisite to the complete freedom to act. We have also learned, however, that there is nothing spiritual in self-reliance unless we make the right choices with that freedom. What then should we do once we have become self-reliant in order to grow spiritually?

The key to making self-reliance spiritual is in using the freedom to comply with God’s commandments. The scriptures are very clear in their command that it is the duty of those who *have to give* to those who are in need.

Jacob, speaking to the people of Nephi, said:

“Think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all and free with your substance, that they may be rich like unto you.

“But before ye seek for riches, seek ye for the kingdom of God.

“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 2:17–19](#).)

In our own dispensation, when the Church was only nine months old, the Lord said:

“And for your salvation I give unto you a commandment, for I have heard your prayers, and the poor have complained before me, and the rich have I made, and all flesh is mine, and I am no respecter of persons.” ([D&C 38:16](#).)

This revelation was given on the second day of January 1831. The next month, in another revelation, the Lord said:

“If thou lovest me thou shalt serve me and keep all my commandments.

“And behold, thou wilt remember the poor, and consecrate of thy properties for their support.” ([D&C 42:29–30](#).)

The same month, the Lord referred to this subject again. Evidently the Brethren had been a little remiss. They had not moved fast enough.

“Behold, I say unto you, that ye must visit the poor and the needy and administer to their relief.” ([D&C 44:6](#).)

The scriptures are full of commandments regarding our obligation to care for the poor; therefore, I will not elaborate further. It has always seemed somewhat paradoxical to me that we must constantly have the Lord *command* us to do those things which are for our own good. The Lord has said,

“He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.” ([Matt. 10:39.](#))

We lose our life by serving and lifting others. By so doing we experience the only true and lasting happiness. Service is not something we endure on this earth so we can earn the right to live in the celestial kingdom. Service is the very fiber of which an exalted life in the celestial kingdom is made.

Knowing that service is what gives our Father in Heaven fulfillment, and knowing that we want to be where He is and as He is, why must we be commanded to serve one another? Oh, for the glorious day when these things all come naturally because of the purity of our hearts. In that day there will be no need for a commandment because we will have experienced for ourselves that we are truly happy only when we are engaged in unselfish service. Let us use the freedom which comes from self-reliance in giving and serving.

Can we see how critical self-reliance becomes when looked upon as the prerequisite to service, when we also know service is what Godhood is all about? Without self-reliance one cannot exercise these innate desires to serve. How can we give if there is nothing there? Food for the hungry cannot come from empty shelves. Money to assist the needy cannot come from an empty purse. Support and understanding cannot come from the emotionally starved. Teaching cannot come from the unlearned. And most important of all, spiritual guidance cannot come from the spiritually weak.

There is an interdependence between those who have and those who have not. The process of giving exalts the poor and humbles the rich. In the process, both are sanctified. The poor, released from the bondage and limitations of poverty, are enabled as free men to rise to their full potential, both temporally and spiritually. The rich, by imparting of their surplus, participate in the eternal principle of giving. Once a person has been made whole or self-reliant, he reaches out to aid others, and the cycle repeats itself.

We are all self-reliant in some areas and dependent in others. Therefore, each of us should strive to help others in areas where we have strengths. At the same time, pride should not prevent us from graciously accepting the helping hand of another when we have a real need. To do so denies another person the opportunity to participate in a sanctifying experience.

Again, I say the principle of self-reliance is spiritual, as are all the principles of the welfare program. This is not a doomsday program, but a program for today. One of the three areas of emphasis recently outlined in the statement on the mission of the Church is to perfect the Saints, and this is the purpose of the welfare program. Today is the time for us to perfect our lives. May we continue to hold fast to these truths, I pray, in the name of [Jesus Christ](#), amen.

