

About goodness and freedom

journal entry

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Yesterday I read the story in First Nephi of Nephi's following the Lord's instructions, building a ship, crossing the water to the Promised Land. I knew the sequence of First Nephi, that when he got to the water, we had come to the veil, so I anticipated finding fun things. What I found amazed me. In Egyptian theology (Nephi is writing in Egyptian and it should not be surprising that he used Egyptian symbolism) one passes from this world to the next in a ship. The heart of the dead was weighed on a balance, if it weighs more than a feather, it was thrown into the water and swallowed up by a crocodile, and that was the end of the person who was judged.

It was all there, going in to the spirit world. Spirits insisting on doing things their way, going deeper and deeper, until (Pistis Sophia like) someone who hurts more pulls others out of the darkness and all who will be saved are saved.

I understood it was also the story told in 3 Nephi 12:8-16.

As my mind plays with the words and the sequences of ideas, I ask myself the most fundamental of questions: Whatever good are you anyway?

As I think about it, I believe that in my life I have never done anything that was intrinsically good. That is, I have never performed an act or said a word whose consequence was good because of the act or the word. I have done and said things which seem to result in good, but the good was a product of the attitude of someone else, not a product of what I did. I might smile at someone because "the world is a happy place today." But whether they read the smile that way, or whether they read it as act of arrogant condescension on my part, is up to them, not to me. My action was not "good" unless their thinking made it so.

The answer is, as Jesus said it is, "Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God."

OK, let's sort this out, I am not capable of doing good because I am not capable of imposing good; but I am capable of doing bad because I am capable of imposing bad? Right? Right.

I must repent of the bad. Right? Right.

But I can do bad without having a bad intent, must I repent of that also? Yes, that is what you usually call "doing good."

How does repentance come to play in that situation?

Answer: You must also repent of doing "good." For, when you decide that something is a good, you are assuming prerogatives which are legitimate only to God. You are to repent of doing "good" as well as of doing "evil."

Why?

Because when you decide to do a "good" for someone else, you judge their needs according to your own desires. (A simple example is the well meaning school teacher who pops a child on the fingers with a ruler every time he picks up his pencil with his left hand. She does it because she thinks it is good for her to force him to be right handed.) You must respond to people according to their perceptions of their own needs, not according to your desire to remake them by a new pattern which you have defined as "good." Thus, you must repent of the "good" you have done, just as you must repent of the bad you have done. You must cease to do/impose "good" just as you must cease to do/impose bad.

What will be left of me?

Nothing. But then, that's all that should be left. If you are a something which to become a something bigger, you pull others into your influence. If you are a nothing who seeks to become a greater nothing, then, like a spring of living water, your energy goes out to bless, but never to control. If you are nothing, then the only good you will think yourself capable of is loving God and loving his children, and obeying his instructions when he tells you what to do or say. Then, even if you do not do an intrinsic good, at least you will be in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing. Your function is to be a facilitator so others may succeed in their own way, not a dictator who defines others' goals and tells them how to get there. Not even God assumes that prerogative.

So what do I do?

First you must learn to obey.

Then you must sacrifice even *your* determination to obey. Being determined to obey is not obedience but an expression of self will. It is not unlike being determined to do "good." God expects his children to be true to the law of their own being -- be prophets, not puppets.

When you sacrifice even that, there will really be nothing left. Create a vacuum which asserts nothing of self-ish-ness, Then fill that place with charity. There, that is the answer to all your questions! You can't understand it by saying, or hearing, or doing it, you will only understand it by *being* it.

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When one is a young child, he is bombarded by feelings which he receives from other people. As he grows up, his culture imposes its norms upon him and he learns to act and say what he is

supposed to act and say. To preserve his own identity, he learns to define his own private self in his own private world, sacred to himself and partly independent of culture. To protect that world and its sacred space, one creates a bubble of glass — a caccon through which one can see and communicate, through which one can be seen -- but only in part. Most of one's interactions with other people, things, and cultural happen through that invisible wall which defines one's "self." On important object of one's life, a necessity to one's survival as an individual, is to permit to come into that private sacred space only the things (people, things, ideas, identities, events, attitudes) which will not violate its sanctity. One way to do that is to cover one's outer, public "self" with masks and facades so our inner selves will not be exposed.

But as one matures, especially as one matures in the gospel, he must open himself to vulnerability again, and begin to communicate his reality with the reality of others. To do this is dangerous, because if one lets other things into his sacred personal space, before his "self" is secure and independent, there is an excellent chance that the "self" will be distorted, diluted, or completely inundated by But this is a danger because one understands that he can not let others in until he learns to do so without diluting his own sense of individuality. This, one can do, only when one has become free.

To be free requires three qualities -- all having to do with integrity — of being true to the law of one's own being. (This kind of freedom is a quality of one's thought and attitude. It is what Jefferson called the "pursuit of happiness" in the Declaration of Independence. Freedom to act on those thoughts, to do things, to move from place to place, is what Jefferson called "liberty." Liberty is a this-world freedom. It is dependent upon ones physical, financial, academic, and other abilities. Freedom of thought, the pursuit of happiness, transcends this world. It is a [probably, "thee"] quality which sustains eternal individuality, and is the engine of eternal progression. It is that freedom — the key to happiness — which I am talking about here.)

The first necessary quality is to not be for sell. If one can be purchased, for any price, then if another offers him that price, he sells himself and becomes a servant, if not a slave. I suppose it is that idea which has Isaiah quote the Lord as saying "you have sold your selves for naught." One often sells himself for pleasure, money, power, fame, and lots of other things which last only a short time and then become like smoke in the wind, dissolving into nothingness, leaving only a scar to testify of its once pseudo-reality.

The second necessary quality is to not be afraid. If one is intimidated, one is not free. Anyone who can make one afraid becomes the master. Isaiah 40-42, which takes place at the Council in Heaven, contains the admonition, "Be not afraid." The principle is simply this. One made a covenants with God while at the Council in Heaven. A covenant is a two-way promise, so God made that same covenant also. If that covenant had to do with one's mission on the earth, then God's part of the covenant is to see to it that one has the full opportunity — no matter what the opposition — to fulfill that covenant. So the charge: "Be not afraid." That does not mean one will not get shot (Joseph Smith), turned into a bonfire (Abinadi), or sawed in half (Isaiah), but it does mean one will be able to fulfill one's mission. The fear which enslaves one is a caving in to the pressures of this world and not being true to the law of one's own being.

That's all fine, but inadequate. Such freedom becomes a strength, rather than a self diluting

weakness, only when it is bridled with understand and fueled with charity. If one is not for sell, and not intimidated, all he is, is a bull-headed, arrogant nincompoop who insists on having his own way. There is no virtue in that. Such a one is not free, he is only a slave to his own sense of self.

There is one more quality necessary to freedom. It is having sufficient correct information to choose to make the correct decision. The most fundamental of that information is being in tune with the eternal law of one's of being, and consequently, being able to define oneself in terms of the Love of the Saviour for his children. All other "correct information" must be filtered through that understanding, otherwise the facts are only sterile and cannot bear the fruit of righteousness.

The second necessary quality of this information is that it must be true. Truth is defined in section 93 as that which is consistent with reality, as things were, as they are, as they will be. If one acts on information which is not true, then one is enslaved by the consequences of its falsehood. In order to be free, and remain free, one must act only on information which is absolute truth. This means that few people in this world are free.

If one is to be free to choose, one must be able to base his decision on absolute truth. Otherwise one is free only to guess, to choose according to what he perceives to be true, rather than what is true. Being able to choose on that criteria -- that is on what one perceives to be true, is fundamental to human dignity, and to personal and cultural progress. The scientific process, the free enterprise system, and the ideas of democracy are all built upon it. In government, for example, when I go into a voting place, I am free to guess but not free to choose. I know almost nothing about most of the candidates except which are Democrats and which are Republicans. If I do know something about them, it is probably only what I have been told via their campaign manager. So I am free to guess. That freedom is precious to me, but unless I go into the voting booth fully informed about the candidate's past, present, and future, I am only free to guess. It is that same way with most of the choices I make.

Individual liberty only happens in a culture where individuals are free to guess, as I have just used that word. Individual freedom is not a cultural phenonima,. Many people have died for freedom in cultures which permit no liberty. One may experience liberty when he imposes his will upon another, but not freedom. One who imposes his will upon another is enslaved by the very chains he holds in his hands. Individual freedom precludes the possibility of wishing to impose one's own will upon another, or to conform another's thinking to one's own sense of what is good. (Mutual liberty requires that actions which are contrary to the ethical standards of a culture must be restricted, but liberty cannot impose morality upon anyone's thinking.)

The product of freedom is happiness. Happiness is a feeling of interrelatedness when one neither imposes himself on another, nor is imposed upon. That interrelatedness may be with "the whole world" when stands alone upon a mountain top; or it may be a togetherness with a single friend. Happiness and friendshi

For this reason, personal revelation is absolutely necessary for personal success in fulfilling the covenants one made at the Council. In this world, one walks in perpetual blindness to things as they were, as they are, and as they are yet to be. In that blindness, one has neither the right nor the ability to make decisions which impact on another's life without having sufficient

information to know what is the correct thing to do. If I set myself as the standard of “good” and impose that goodness on others, I am being silly, unkind, and perhaps cruel. But if I have sufficient information to know what is true and then act accordingly, I am acting in righteousness. There is, and can be, no self-aggrandizement in that. There is only one adequate source of that kind of true information. That is the Lord, through revelation.

Now the problem becomes more severe: How can one know, unerringly, what is the Spirit of the Lord, and what is only “good” according to one’s own enthusiasm, pride, self indulgence.

Answer: You jolly well better find out!