

Home & Visiting Teaching: Ministers of Christ

Bishop Cameron Ford 2/12/2017

Brothers and sisters, I come before you today to speak on some items that I feel strongly that the Lord would have me address. These items will be a challenge for all of us to step out of our comfort zones. I pray that the spirit will be here to teach us and that we will all be willing to listen to that teaching with open and humble hearts.

The first is regarding the overall theme of this sacrament meeting, namely: Home and visiting teaching. As we know, when we agreed to follow the Lord through the covenant of baptism and each week when we partake of the sacrament, aside from promising that we will keep his commandments, we are also making a covenant to “bear one another’s burdens”, to “mourn with those that mourn”, to “comfort those that stand in need of comfort”, and to “stand as a witness of God at all times and in all things and in all places”. All of this can be summed up by the sacramental phrase: “that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him”. In essence, we are signing up for a process that will teach us how to become more like our Savior, and if followed diligently will not only teach us, but will gradually transform us through His atonement into that kind of person. And what kind of person was Jesus of Nazareth? He was first and foremost a teacher, a shepherd of people, a minister to the one. If we would follow him, then it is critical that we strive to be teachers and ministers like he is.

By following the Lord into the waters of baptism, those that seek to be the His disciples should all feel as if we have been charged with our own personal ministry; charged to seek after those that the Lord has caused to be put into our circles of influence. The seriousness of our responsibilities to perform well this ministry is emphasized by the prophet Jacob in the Book of Mormon. In words that bring to mind the sacred initiatory ordinances of the Temple, he says:

“And we did magnify our office unto the Lord, taking upon us the responsibility, answering the sins of the people upon our own heads if we did not teach them the word of God with all diligence: wherefore, by laboring with our might their blood might not come upon our garments; otherwise their blood would come upon our garments, and we would not be found spotless at the last day.” Jacob 1:19

It is not just the prophets and apostles that should feel this way. We all have a ministry that the Lord has given us. I believe that this is one of the main reasons that we do not have paid clergy or polished

professional ministers and teachers in the church. It is because the general membership desperately need the opportunity to keep the covenants they have made “to be willing to take upon them the name of [the] Son” by being ministers and teachers to each other; and chief among these opportunities to be like, and minister like, Christ are the assignments of Home and Visiting teaching.

Some have expressed the concern that these assignments can appear insincere, superficial, or forced because they are not chosen by the individuals. Instead they are “assigned friends”. However, who among us has had the opportunity of selecting exactly which spirits that Heavenly Father sends down to be born into our families? Do we love our children any less because we did not get to choose their gender or their personality? Of course not. We understand that when we decided to invite children into our homes, part of the agreement was that we would accept whatever was assigned. So we love, teach, and serve them as best we can. Similarly, when we decide to follow the Savior we also agree to accept whatever assignments he sends to us through his servants. And even when you feel that some of those assignments may be less than inspired, I would ask you to have compassion and charity on those that are charged with making these assignments. I assure you that they are trying to do the best that they can. Also, due to the important responsibility that we have to make sure that everyone has a Home and Visiting teacher, please understand that when you refuse to take or complete assignments, in one way or another, you are causing someone else to take on additional responsibilities and assignments; *and* you are missing out on an important opportunity to keep your covenant to follow the Savior.

Now I would like to clearly emphasize one thing. We know that numbers are not important. People are important. So please be more worried about the welfare of those you are assigned than as to if you can claim credit for it. But to make an impact, regular contact with individuals must be made, and our reporting is a way to help us be accountable and reminded of our responsibilities.

Brethren, a good case can be made that Home Teaching has an impact on the faithfulness of church members. Stake statistics show that there is a correlation of increased church attendance when home teaching is being accomplished successfully. This makes sense to me because there are always two sides to a relationship. We have to be willing to go Home Teaching and our families have to be willing to be Home Taught. Even if your families do not cooperate in letting you home teach them, just the fact of you trying to setup an appointment to visit helps them know that they are loved and being thought of, and it allows them to decide if they are willing to make time in their life for the Lord. Priesthood is the authority to stand in the place of the Lord when he authorizes us to do so. Just as the Priests, Teachers, and Deacons stand in the place of the Savior when they faithfully fulfill their responsibilities to prepare,

bles, and pass the sacrament each Sunday, we as home teachers and priesthood holders on assignment from the Lord represent the Savior to our Home Teaching families. If families are able to make the time to let Home Teachers come, then odds are they are also going to be willing to make the time to go to Church.

Brothers and sisters, will we as families make time for the Lord by allowing His servants to regularly enter our homes? I know that I can certainly improve by making myself more available to my Home Teachers. Now, having said all of this, I know that there are always crazy months when schedules make it difficult to connect. So please don't stress about missing a month every once in a while. But if you are seeing a trend, I ask you to please make corrections.

Sisters, you similarly have an important role in representing the Lord to those you visit teach. According to current instructions from the Relief Society leaders, visits to the home are not required (brethren, this does not apply to us). The idea for visiting teaching is that it is the caring, serving, and ministering according to the needs of the individual that is important. If a visit is needed, then a visit should be made. If the needs of the individual are better met that month by a phone call or text, then do that. It doesn't matter if loving service and kind words are done through phone calls, texts, emails, visits, or dropping things by, as long as you are truly ministering to the needs of the individual.

To both Home Teachers and Visiting Teachers, I would ask all of us to please be conscious of the burden we may be placing on those we visit when we stay too long either in their homes or on the phone. Once again, it should be according to the needs of the individual, not according to our own needs. When we take a significant chunk out of someone's day by staying a long time or staying on the phone for a long time, it can turn something that is helpful and uplifting into something that is to be dreaded and avoided. If our visits are longer than 45 minutes, then they are too long.

Brothers and sisters, home and visiting teaching are vitally important both to those that are taught and to those that teach. No matter how busy we are, we all make time for those things that we feel are important. I ask you to please consider home and visiting teaching as important things. If you find yourself with a negative or apathetic attitude regarding this important responsibility, I plead with you to humble yourself and pray to have a change of heart. If you do so, I promise that the Lord will open your eyes to see how important this assignment is to your own spiritual growth in learning to become more like the Savior and fulfilling the covenants that you have made with Him.

I now want to take just a few minutes to address another topic. I will begin by using myself as an example.

My family genetics have blessed me with what can be at times a pretty severe looking face. As I have mentioned in the past, when I am not smiling I have been told I do not look friendly or approachable. My natural tendency of mostly keeping to myself except with close friends and family has often amplified the problem in the past. However, usually when people spend time with me and get to know me they find out that I am actually a relatively nice guy. At least I hope so.

I believe most people are this way. If you don't love someone, it is probably because you don't really know them yet. Brothers and sisters, I *know* this ward. It is filled with wonderful faithful people who love the Lord. We vary from young families struggling to make ends meet, to single parents, to the divorced and un-married, to those that are in the sunset of their lives. There is not an individual or family in this ward that has not dealt with some kind of heartache or tragedy or hardship. This has made each heart tender and compassionate. There is so much service that goes on between each other that is unknown to most of the rest of us. We are not perfect, but this really is a good loving ward. However, sometimes it is hard for new ward members to get to know us enough to see this. It can become easy for us as members of the church to get into patterns where we come to church each week and sit in the same seats, talk to the same people, and spend time with those that we already know because that is what we are comfortable with. This can make it hard for new people to get to know and love us and for us to get to know and love them.

In general I feel that our Ward has always been welcoming, but right now there are members in our midst that do not feel welcomed, loved, or included; and even one person feeling this way is one too many. They may feel that they do not fit in, or that their feelings, thoughts, or life circumstances are just too different from the rest of us. To those that may feel this way, I ask you to try harder to get to know your fellow ward members. To know them is to love them.

To all of us, I ask that we try to do just a little better at putting our arms around every ward member. If we find that we are in the same patterns week after week, I ask that we try to break out and invite new people into our circles of friends, especially those that are in different stages or circumstances of life. If you see someone new, introduce yourself. If you see a person sitting alone, go sit by them or invite them to sit by you. Get their cell phone number or email and send them a note or invite them to dinner. Make it a goal to talk to someone new each week.

I know that many are already doing these things. I just ask that we all try to pay closer attention to those that may be feeling lost and lonely in our midst.

Brothers and sisters, I love you. I am grateful for your goodness, your faithfulness, and your service. I pray that our Heavenly Father will bless all of us in our efforts to be more effective ministers and disciples of His only begotten son. I pray that as we figuratively and literally put our arms around each other, that we will be able to feel more strongly the loving arms of the Savior in each of our lives.

In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, Amen.