

Our Good Shepherd

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Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd, finds joy in seeing His diseased sheep progress toward healing.

We get a glimpse into our Heavenly Father's character as we recognize the immense compassion He has for sinners and appreciate the distinction He makes between sin and those who sin. This glimpse helps us have a more "correct [understanding of] his character, perfections, and attributes"¹ and is foundational to exercising faith in Him and in His Son, Jesus Christ. The Savior's compassion in the face of our imperfections draws us toward Him and motivates us in our repeated struggles to repent and emulate Him. As we become more like Him, we learn to treat others as He does, regardless of any outward characteristic or behavior.

The impact of distinguishing between the outward characteristics of an individual and the individual himself is central to the novel *Les Misérables*, by the French author Victor Hugo.² As the novel opens, the narrator introduces Bienvenu Myriel, the bishop of Digne, and discusses a dilemma facing the bishop. Should he visit a man who is an avowed atheist and is despised in the community because of his past behavior in the French Revolution?³

The narrator states that the bishop could naturally feel a deep aversion for the man. Then the narrator poses a simple question: "All the same, should the scabs of the sheep cause the shepherd to recoil?"⁴ Answering for the bishop, the narrator provides a definitive answer, "No"—and then adds a humorous comment: "But what a sheep!"⁵

In this passage, Hugo compares the man's "wickedness" with skin disease in sheep and compares the bishop with a shepherd who does not withdraw when faced with a sheep that is sick. The bishop is sympathetic and later in the novel demonstrates a similar compassion for another man, the main protagonist in the novel, a degraded ex-convict, Jean Valjean. The bishop's mercy and empathy motivate Jean Valjean to change the course of his life.

Since God uses disease as a metaphor for sin throughout the scriptures, it is reasonable to ask, "How does Jesus Christ react when faced with our metaphorical diseases—our sins?" After all, the Savior said that He "cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance";⁶ so how can He look at us, imperfect as we are, without recoiling in horror and disgust?

The answer is simple and clear. As the Good Shepherd,⁷ Jesus Christ views disease in His sheep as a condition that needs treatment, care, and compassion. This shepherd, our Good Shepherd, finds joy in seeing His diseased sheep progress toward healing.

The Savior foretold that He would “feed his flock like a shepherd,”⁸ “seek [out] that which [is] lost, ... bring again that which [is] driven away, ... bind up that which [is] broken, and ... strengthen that which [is] sick.”⁹ Though apostate Israel was depicted as being consumed with sinful “wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores,”¹⁰ the Savior encouraged, exhorted, and promised healing.¹¹

The Savior’s mortal ministry was indeed characterized by love, compassion, and empathy. He did not disdainfully walk the dusty roads of Galilee and Judea, flinching at the sight of sinners. He did not dodge them in abject horror. No, He ate with them.¹² He helped and blessed, lifted and edified, and replaced fear and despair with hope and joy. Like the true shepherd He is, He seeks us and finds us to offer relief and hope.¹³ Understanding His compassion and love helps us exercise faith in Him—to repent and be healed.

The Gospel of John records the effect of the Savior’s empathy on a sinner. Scribes and Pharisees brought a woman caught in the very act of adultery to the Savior. The accusers implied that she should be stoned, in compliance with the law of Moses. Jesus, in response to persistent questioning, finally said to them, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.”

The accusers departed, “and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

“When Jesus ... saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?

“She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.”¹⁴

Surely, the Savior did not condone adultery. But He also did not condemn the woman. He encouraged her to reform her life. She was motivated to change because of His compassion and mercy. The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible attests to her resultant discipleship: “And the woman glorified God from that hour, and believed on his name.”¹⁵

While God is empathetic, we should not mistakenly believe that He is accepting and open-minded about sin. He is not. The Savior came to earth to save us *from* our sins and, importantly, will not save us *in* our sins.¹⁶ A skilled interrogator, Zeezrom once tried to trap Amulek by asking: “Shall [the coming Messiah] save his people in their sins? And Amulek answered and said unto him: I say unto you he shall not, for it is impossible for him to deny his word. ... He cannot save them in their sins.”¹⁷ Amulek spoke a fundamental truth that to be saved from our sins, we must abide “the conditions of repentance,” which unleash the Redeemer’s power to save our souls.¹⁸

The Savior's compassion, love, and mercy draw us toward Him.¹⁹ Through His Atonement, we are no longer satisfied with our sinful state.²⁰ God is clear about what is right and acceptable to Him and what is wrong and sinful. This is not because He desires to have mindless, obedient followers. No, our Heavenly Father desires that His children knowingly and willingly choose to become like Him²¹ and qualify for the kind of life He enjoys.²² In doing so, His children fulfill their divine destiny and become heirs to all that He has.²³ For this reason, Church leaders cannot alter God's commandments or doctrine contrary to His will, to be convenient or popular.

However, in our lifelong quest to follow Jesus Christ, His example of kindness to those who sin is particularly instructive. We, who are sinners, must, like the Savior, reach out to others with compassion and love. Our role is also to help and bless, lift and edify, and replace fear and despair with hope and joy.

The Savior rebuked individuals who recoiled from others they viewed as unclean and who self-righteously judged others as more sinful than they.²⁴ That is the pointed lesson the Savior directed to those who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." He spoke this parable:

"Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.

"The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.

"I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

"And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner."

Jesus then concluded, "I tell you, this man [the publican] went down to his house justified rather than the other [the Pharisee]: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."²⁵

The message for us is clear: a repenting sinner draws closer to God than does the self-righteous person who condemns that sinner.

The human tendency to be self-righteous and judgmental was also present in Alma's day. As the people "began to establish the church more fully ... the church began to wax proud, ... the people of the church began to be lifted up in the pride of their eyes, ... they began to be scornful, one towards another, and they began to persecute those that did not believe according to their own will and pleasure."²⁶

This persecution was specifically prohibited: "Now there was a strict law among the people of the church, that there should not any man, belonging to the church, arise and persecute those that did not belong to the church, and that there should be no

persecution among themselves.”²⁷ The guiding principle for Latter-day Saints is the same. We must not be guilty of persecuting anyone inside or outside the Church.

Those who have been persecuted for any reason know what unfairness and bigotry feel like. As a teenager living in Europe in the 1960s, I felt that I was repeatedly picked on and bullied because I was an American and because I was a member of the Church. Some of my schoolmates treated me as though I were personally responsible for unpopular U.S. foreign policies. I was also treated as though my religion were an affront to the nations in which I lived because it differed from state-sponsored religion. Later, in various countries across the world, I have had small glimpses into the ugliness of prejudice and discrimination suffered by those who are targeted because of their race or ethnicity.

Persecution comes in many forms: ridicule, harassment, bullying, exclusion and isolation, or hatred toward another. We must guard against bigotry that raises its ugly voice toward those who hold different opinions. Bigotry manifests itself, in part, in unwillingness to grant equal freedom of expression.²⁸ Everyone, including people of religion, has the right to express his or her opinions in the public square. But no one has a license to be hateful toward others as those opinions are expressed.

Church history gives ample evidence of our members being treated with hatred and bigotry. How ironically sad it would be if we were to treat others as we have been treated. The Savior taught, “Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”²⁹ For us to ask for respect, we must be respectful. Furthermore, our genuine conversion brings “meekness, and lowliness of heart,” which invites “the Holy Ghost [and fills us with] perfect love,”³⁰ an “unfeigned love”³¹ for others.

Our Good Shepherd is unchanging and feels the same way today about sin and sinners as He did when He walked the earth. He does not recoil from us because we sin, even if He on occasion must think, “But what a sheep!” He loves us so much that He provided the way for us to repent and become clean so we can return to Him and our Heavenly Father.³² In doing so, Jesus Christ also set the example for us to follow—to show respect to all and hatred toward none.

As His disciples, let us fully mirror His love and love one another so openly and completely that no one feels abandoned, alone, or hopeless. I testify that Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd, who loves and cares for us. He knows us and laid down His life for His sheep.³³ He also lives for us and wants us to know Him and exercise faith in Him. I love and adore Him, and I am profoundly grateful for Him, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

