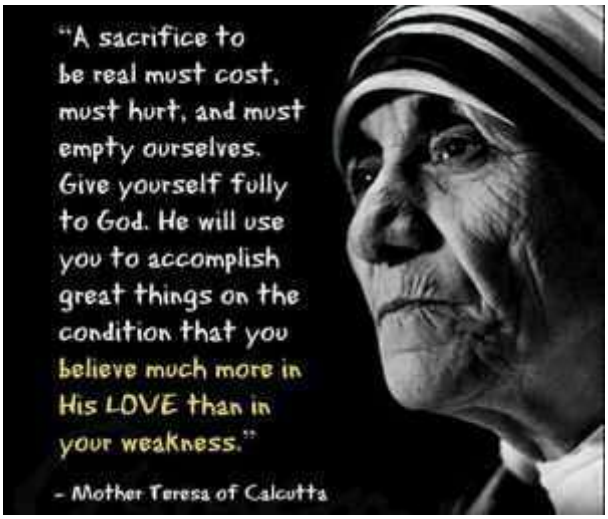

I have been associated with a Facebook group on ministering for many months. I have even written a number of articles about ministering. But not until last night did the light go on about the real truth of ministering, about which I have been completely blind.

The lie we tell ourselves

Conveniently, we often (and when I say "we often" I mean "I often") insist on believing that people's problems in life can be solved with a plate of brownies or cookies. We want to believe that a short conversation over the fence or from the other side of someone's screen door is all that is needed to have done as the Savior would do. Our slate is clean and we have made ourselves pure and holy before the Lord.

And it may be that when we first start to get to know someone, that plate of cookies or a conversation from the other side of the screen door is all we can manage. They don't yet know us, and we certainly haven't gotten to know them yet. The mistake is in believing that what we have just done, as uncomfortable as it might feel for us, is all the Lord requires of us. It is also a mistake if we think that this single visit is enough. Oh that this is all that ministering to others required.

Clarification

Ministering covers the gamut of human interaction. It ranges from a simple smile to brighten another's day to caring for the elderly for years on end as their physical and mental health degrade. There are those who literally wear away their own lives in the service of others who need constant care. So making simple blanket statements about ministering becomes a slippery slope, because there are so many circumstances and situations that we need to account for. The points I wish to make today cover only the shift in perspective I experienced last night.

Lest anyone get the impression I am being critical of those who wish to conclude their ministering efforts with a loaf on someone's doorstep, please know that I have done most everything I can think of to be as shallow in my ministering as possible. I have

made the rounds delivering token gifts to all my ministering families after having not visited them for months on end. And if they were not home, I left their gift on the doorstep with a simple note. While these gestures may have lightened the day for a few of these people, I know that it was more an attempt to sooth my personal guilt than it was an expression of genuine care and concern for the person or people in that home. I fully confess that I had been caught up in the lie that somehow I could please the Lord and do my duty by these superficial attempts at contact with others. I blush with embarrassment even writing these words.

The Savior's example

We all know that the Savior ministered to the sinners and social outcasts, but for many of us these words hold no reality. When I would read these words in my mind Jesus kindly kept his distance to arm's length when the leper approached him and healed him without having to touch him. When he lifted the dirt-stained cripple from the street and commanded him to walk, he then quietly wiped his hands on his robes to clean off the dirt.

These images may seem shocking or alarming to you, but I never realized until now that this was my personal assumption. I was putting my own bias and fears on the Savior's behavior and filtering what is written in the scriptures to suite my own feelings. I have been, in fact, wresting (twisting) the scriptures to suit my own desired narrative. Not good.

Think about the parable of the good Samaritan. Samaritans were considered unclean and pagans to the Jews. They would walk great distances just to avoid having to pass through Samaritan-owned lands. When the despised Samaritan found the man (a Jew) who was severely beaten and left for dead, did he call an ambulance to come and haul him away? Did he travel to the nearest town and report the man to the police so they could take care of him? No, he got down on the ground with the man, and personally cleaned each of his wounds with wine to disinfect them then poured oil into each wound to protect it from getting infected. He lifted the man on his own animal and carried him to the inn, saw to it that he was made comfortable and provided for then arranged with the innkeeper to take care of the man's bill if he required more assistance than what he was paying for upfront. This part of the account is found in Luke 10:33-35.

> 33 But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,
>
> 34 And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.
>
> 35 And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.

Personally caring for someone who has been beaten to a pulp means you will have a pile of your clothes or towels covered in someone else's blood and dirt, and you will likely have the same on your own clothes and skin by the time you are through. This is the first time I have thought about the physical reality of what Jesus was describing to the lawyer who asked who his neighbor was. This parable, for me, has lost much of the fairy tale luster I used to ascribe to it.

The truth about ministering

In the Facebook group (Latter-day Saint Ministering) I belong to, what recently caught my eye was the stark reality of some of the posts. One man who, because of his day-time job, I put on a pedestal, confessed that as a young boy he had been taken into a tool shed and sexually abused by a man ten years older than him. Another woman is wheelchair bound and has to stay at home every day of the week as she cares for two daughters, both dying from cancer. Another person talked to the group of a medical condition that leaves her in such despair that she has tried suicide and doesn't know how she is going to make it from one day to the next. Another man is wheelchair bound and has a respiratory condition that makes it extremely difficult to breath from moment to moment. The list seems endless.

What I have come to realize is that real ministering, the kind where I get past a plate of cookies and, like the good Samaritan, I get my hands dirty with the physical reality of what others have to deal with, requires all of me, my time, my attention, my caring, my love, my compassion, my understanding, my intellect - all of me. I can't go into the home of my ministering family and expect their lives to be smooth sailing. They may try to present a picture of spiritual health that makes it seem they need nothing from me, but life is teaching me that this facade we Latter-day Saints show to all those around us

is doing us more harm than good. Life may allow the occasional "perfect" family, but they are actually fewer and farther between than we think they are.

We are taught in the scriptures that God, Himself told us that we would be proven in all things to see if we would still be obedient to His commandments (look in Abraham 3). In some parts of the world where life is very comfortable, meaning we have food, shelter, and heat when needed, we have developed a fear that people will judge us as being unrighteous if our lives don't at least appear perfect on the surface. I think this is where I learned my plate-of-cookies approach to ministering.

What I am discovering now is that ministering means I must be willing to get my hands dirty. Our quorum once had a man with a respiratory condition that required him to be beaten daily to loosen the phlegm that built up in his lungs. He couldn't cough it up, so we had to loosen it for him. For several years while his family was in our ward, each night someone from the quorum went to his house and pounded on his back trying to help him get out the phlegm. At first I was grossed out by the thought of what we had to do, but as time went on I began to see my time with this good brother as a blessing that could not have come in any other way. He was always so humble and grateful for the physical care we provided that his wife didn't have the strength to provide.

Final Thoughts

I plead with you, wherever you live, and whatever your circumstances are, to reconsider how you think of ministering. In this Facebook group I have mentioned, it is the people who need ministering to the most who are often the best ministers. They may be bedridden, crippled, unable to stay employed, or have any one of a hundred other conditions, yet they do everything in their power to bless the lives of others with their time and efforts. I think the key here is that they devote their time to being there for people. They forego personal pleasures for the experiences they gain in the service of others. They have learned for themselves that ministering can be messy, physically messy. But they have also learned how much they appreciate that service when someone is willing to come and do what they need done for them, because they cannot do it for themselves.

This may seem a little odd, but I encourage you to watch this talk from Elder Russell M. Nelson entitled, "With God Nothing Shall Be Impossible." When we wonder how

helping someone can be done, because we don't see any way to achieve the impossible, think of the encouraging words from this talk. We are all commissioned by the Lord to minister to one another. Ministering requires involvement and personal commitment that requires time and energy, often for years at a time. Just think what we can achieve when we enlist the help of our God in our ministering efforts. Until we are willing to make this kind of commitment, we will forever remain on someone's doorstep with our plate of cookies.

[With God Nothing Shall Be Impossible]

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Painful Truths About Ministering