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Pride and Riches

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Chauncey C. Riddle

One of the most memorable and striking passages of the Book of Mormon is Jacob's instructions to his people on the subjects of pride and riches. Our purpose here is to examine the detail of this message and to apply it to our own day. We will proceed by giving a verse by verse commentary on the short passage on this subject found in Jacob 2:12-21, and will then draw some relevant conclusions for our own time.

Parentheses and superscripts are used to mark the portions of the text upon which specific commentary will be made. Commentary is then made without further reference to substantiating evidence. The supposition is that each reader will compare notes with the author's opinions and submit any differences of opinion to the Lord in prayer for resolution. That, of course, is what must be done with any evidence or opinion, footnoted or not.

The setting for Jacob's message is that his older brother Nephi, the son of Lehi, and leader and prophet unto the Nephites, has died. Jacob has been consecrated to be the spiritual leader of the Nephites, and on the occasion of the message concerning riches he is addressing those whom we might well presume are the more faithful of the Nephite peoples because his discourse takes place within the confines of the temple (Jacob 1:17). In response to Jacob's prayer, the Lord has given him instruction, specific word, to deliver to these covenant people on this occasion, and Jacob delivers that word as quoted below.

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Jacob 2:12. And now behold, my brethren, this is the word which I declare unto you, that many of you have begun to search for gold, and for silver, and for all manner of precious ores, in the which (this land, which is a land of promise unto you and to your seed)^a, doth abound most plentifully.

a. A land of promise is a place designated by the Lord where he will go before those who are assigned to go there. The promise is that there they may find righteousness and the Lord himself, to be personally redeemed from the fall of Adam. There is no guarantee that a promised land will be fruitful or that it will abound in ores, such as Lehi's promised land did. If it is fruitful and abounds with treasures, this may actually prove to be a snare to the people if they forget the real purpose of their being in the land and if they then substitute temporal desires for the promised spiritual blessings.

13. (And the hand of providence hath smiled upon you most pleasingly, that you have obtained many riches)^a; (and because some of you have obtained more abundantly than that of your brethren)^b (ye are lifted up in the pride of your hearts)^c, and (wear stiff necks and high heads)^d (because of the costliness of your apparel)^e, and (persecute your brethren because ye suppose that ye are better than they)^f.

a. The Lord is the provider, the hand of providence. He wants his children to enjoy the good things of the earth.

b. The Lord gives different gifts in differing amounts to each of his children. He deliberately does not equally bestow his temporal blessings. He wishes to give each of his children the opportunity voluntarily to share with others who have less of some temporal gift. Sometimes the temporal blessings are given to those who seem to deserve them least. The initial distribution of spiritual blessings also often seems to be unequal and unearned. But any subsequent spiritual blessings must be earned upon the principles of righteousness. In this area of further spiritual blessings, the Lord is immediate, equitable and absolutely

just in bestowing his blessings, even as he will be in bestowing physical blessings in the next world.

c. We lift up our heads in pride as if we were something special among men, supposing that it has been our intelligence and industry which have provided for our desires rather than the Provider. Thus we look down on those whom we consider to be less industrious and less intelligent.

d. We have stiff necks in that we will not bow to the God of the land and acknowledge the source of our blessings. We have high heads in the haughtiness of pride.

e. The common way of showing wealth the world over is to wear expensive clothing. Expensive clothing is labor intensive, and wearing it shows that we are able to buy the time and skill of others more than most persons can.

f. Persecution comes in so many forms that it is impossible to name them all. But standard ways of persecuting are to look down on others, to speak down to them, and to segregate them because of their lack of wealth.

14. And now, my brethren, (do ye suppose that God justifieth you in this thing)^a? Behold, I say unto you, Nay. But (he condemneth you)^b, and (if ye persist in these things his judgments must speedily come unto you)^c.

a. God justifies men by teaching them what is just or righteous, then empowering them to live up to the standard. He never calls an evil thing just, and can never make a person who persists in doing evil things into a just person. The only hope an unjust person has to become just is personal repentance through faith in Jesus Christ.

b. Jacob is the Lord's anointed; he represents Jesus Christ to them. Thus they need to take very seriously his flat statement that the Lord condemns them.

c. This is a plain warning of peril. The Lord will not always immediately bring misery and woe upon a people who are wicked if they know him not. But when a people have covenanted to become his children and obey his commandments, he warns them

through his prophet and then shakes them temporally if they will not hearken to the spiritual warning. This has the goal of causing them to be humbled through physical suffering if they will not be humbled by spiritual warnings. Only as they are humble can they repent and receive the promises.

15. (O that he would show you that he can pierce you, and with one glance of his eye he can smite you to the dust)^a.

a. Jacob seems to be saying: I would that he would impress you by letting you see his great power, without having actually to smite you so that you and your children suffer.

16. O (that he would rid you from this)^a (iniquity)^b and (abomination)^c. And, O (that ye would listen unto the word of his commands)^d, and (let not this pride of your hearts destroy your souls)^e!

a. It is the Lord who makes it possible for a person to repent. He does not take the iniquity out of the world or the person, but enables the person to depart from the iniquity by turning to the corresponding righteousness. When we have departed from iniquity by making the good things the Savior would have us do part of our character, then we can also receive a permanent forgiveness for the iniquity once committed.

b. Iniquity is inequity, and it is never seen more plainly than when some are rich and some are poor and there is no attempt on the part of the rich to create equity in righteousness. Unrighteous ways to create equity in wealth are theft and governmental redistribution. Both of these attempted solutions use force to negate agency, and never do create real equity, for they are based on the faulty “wisdom” of men. The righteous way to attain equity in society is for the rich to humble themselves before God and share their wealth with the poor as he directs, until they have achieved a just equity (D&C 104: 11-18).

c. Abomination is that which departs from, is different from, the revelations of God. All righteousness comes through faith in God, which is loving obedience to his revealed instructions.

“Omin” is the equivalent of “omen,” which refers to revelation. “Ab” means away from.

d. Faith comes by the hearing of the word. If only they will inquire of the Lord to know for sure that this is his word and then do what he says in full faith, they can and will be released from the curse under which they operate.

e. The curse under which they operate is their own doing. They have departed from the way of the Lord, and the destruction of their souls, spirit and body, awaits them if they will not now return to that strait and narrow way.

17. (Think of your brethren like unto yourselves)^a, and (be familiar with all)^b and (free with your substance)^c, (that they may be rich like unto you)^c

a. The Lord’s celestial way is for us to love one another even as he loves us. If we are not quite up to that, at least we ought to think of and treat our brethren and sisters of the covenant the same way we treat ourselves.

b. The desire to make money, especially to benefit unduly, is one of the great spiritual traps of the world. Spiritually, we might well be much better off if there were no money and we were under the necessity of trading labor. That would be one step toward equity. But another, more immediate step, is simply freely to give of our possessions to those who have less than we do, being aware of their needs and circumstances and imparting to them under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

c. Richness is relative. It is not required that all men rise to a certain absolute level of physical wealth. It is only required that we of the new and everlasting covenant be equal, voluntarily equal, with each other in whatever we have. Then the Lord promises that he will give us the abundance of spiritual blessings. (D&C 70:14)

In any mortal situation, a righteous person who has the strength to do so will be voluntarily producing physical goods and services for the society in which he dwells. He will consume only what is necessary of these self-gained benefits, and will

voluntarily share the surplus with others who are in need of his surplus.

One such surplus is knowledge, skills and tools which enable us to produce physical benefits. These may be righteously shared with others and are even more helpful to the recipient in most cases than are consumable goods.

18. But (before ye seek for riches, seek ye for the kingdom of God)^a.

a. There is nothing wrong in itself about seeking for riches. But we must put things in proper perspective, in proper order. The correct order is first to straiten our hearts and minds into the pattern of the Lord's love. That we do by finding his kingdom, accepting the covenant to enter that kingdom, then fully participating in the proffered salvation of our souls from the evil which is within our own breasts, which evil keeps us from becoming just and upright in all that we do.

19. And (after ye have obtained a hope in Christ)^a (ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them)^b; and (ye will seek them for the intent to do good)^c—(to clothe the naked)^d, and (to feed the hungry)^e, and (to liberate the captive)^f, and (administer relief to the sick and the afflicted)^g.

a. Hope in Christ is the pivotal concept which helps us to bridge from the beginnings of faith in Jesus Christ to the attaining of the fullness of faith, which is charity. After we receive a manifestation from the Savior which reveals his will, we have the opportunity to exercise faith by believing and obeying that instruction. Obeying the Savior gives us a right to hope for the spiritual blessings which the Savior can so richly bestow. The principal blessing which a person of faith can hope for is to receive a new heart, a pure heart which no longer desires any form of evil. This pure heart is called "charity" and is the greatest mortal attainment of any human being. Attaining it makes it possible to be able to ask for and to receive any other blessing from the Savior. Such a further blessing can be either spiritual or temporal. Additional gifts can then be given freely by the Savior to the

individual who has charity because there is then no danger that the person will use any gift for an evil purpose. Thus to attain to a genuine hope in Christ is another way of saying that we have attained unto charity, which is the pure love of Christ. Then we are ready to endure to the end of our lives in righteousness, in doing pure and godly works in behalf of others. We are then ready to seek riches of any kind to be used for righteous purposes.

b. The Savior tells us that when we are pure and cleansed from all sin, we can ask for anything and will surely receive it as we obey him, because we will not ask amiss but will ask for good things to do the work of righteousness.

c. The intent to do good is the intent to do the will of God, even Jesus Christ, who is the fountain of all righteousness for the inhabitants of this earth. This good sought may be of four forms or types, each one corresponding to part of the nature of each individual human being.

We humans consist of heart, mind, strength, and might. The heart is the heart of the spirit body and is the decision center in the human being. The mind is the brain of the spirit body and is the knower, planner, executor function of the human being. The strength is the mortal human body especially including the power of procreation. The might is whatever power or influence the person has in his or her sphere of action resulting from the abilities of the heart, mind and body and also from any wealth, property, persuasive power, or ability to command the efforts of other persons which anyone might enjoy. Thus there are good things of the heart, such as pure desires; good things of the mind, such as truths; good things of the body, such as health and strength; and good things of might, such as food, clothing, shelter, fuel, money, land, political position, priesthood power, etc.

d. The naked may be those who have no clothing with whom we might share our excess clothing. Or they might be naked emotionally, such as the bereaved or hopeless to whom we can extend love. Or they might be naked intellectually, and we can share with them a knowledge of just how this world works

so that they need no longer be so buffeted because of their ignorance.

e. Some hungry persons need physical food. But others are hungry in heart; they need love and kindness in a world that offers much hate and tyranny. Or they may have an insatiable curiosity which they cannot satisfy because they lack the opportunity to learn.

f. Some captives are political or military prisoners who are incarcerated through no fault of their own. To use our might to free them may be most important. Or they may be justly imprisoned, where influence might be brought to bear to help them to square a debt with society so that they may be honorably released. They might be emotional captives who are under the spell of an evil person and need an alternative to which to turn. They may be intellectual captives whose vision of the world is constrained to the point that they know not God. They may be captive to drugs or sin, from which they might be released through the assistance of the ordinances of the holy priesthood.

g. Administering relief to the sick and the afflicted may be caring for someone who has had a stroke or a debilitating disease. But it may also be nurturing someone who is suffering under a load of guilt and does not know of the mercies of the Savior. It may be to help someone who has a preoccupation with a false idea or cause, who needs to see the world another way. It may be to help a person who is possessed of evil spirits who can find no relief except in Christ.

Whatever the virtually infinite variety of need, the Savior has a solution which faithful servants may obtain and administer for every malady save one: A hard heart which will not admit the Holy Spirit. Only that person himself can change that.

20. And now, my brethren, I have spoken unto you concerning pride; and those of you which have afflicted your neighbor, and persecuted him because ye were proud in your hearts, of the things which God hath given you, (what say ye of it)^a?

a. When the prophet speaks to those of the covenant, they of necessity must respond. If they are repentant, they will confess their sins and forsake them; thus Jacob asks his people what they will say. If they wish to continue the apostasy, they will murmur under their breath and persist in the way of evil. In either case they are judging themselves and setting the direction of their own future unto good or evil, whichever they choose; and out of their own mouths they are exonerated or condemned.

21. Do ye not suppose that such things are abominable unto him who created all flesh? And the one being is as precious in his sight as the other. And all flesh is of the dust; and (for the selfsame end hath he created them, that they should keep his commandments and glorify him forever)^a.

a. God is a god of righteousness. He desires that we should worship and glorify him because that increases the righteousness in the universe and enables him to enlarge us without end. The dust of the earth and we humans were both created, or organized, for that same purpose, but most of the time the dust is more faithful than are most humans.

Reflection on Jacob's message brings three strong conclusions to mind. The first is that there is a good reason why it is hard for people to share: the differences of values and commitments which they have. The second is that to live the gospel of Jesus Christ we must be willing to be poor. The third is that before we do anything else in our life we should seek for a hope in Christ.

Having differences of values and commitments does not make sharing impossible or unnecessary, only harder. When people have the same values and allegiances, it is easier to share. When they do not, sharing can become more difficult. To use an extreme example to emphasize the point, let us suppose two families living as neighbors. One family is very frugal and saving, and through years of living by those principles have gathered a small surplus. They are in a position to share. Suppose the other family is very needy. The first family sees that need and takes part of its hard earned savings to the other family to buy groceries.

Then suppose that the second family takes the gift, rejoices in it, but decides that the best way to spend it would be to invite all of their friends over for a big alcohol bust. In one evening they squander the hard earned savings of the frugal family and are even poorer than they were to start with. Sharing has gone awry there.

For this reason, the first thing people should share with one another is the restored gospel of Jesus Christ in the hope that there can be a common set of values, and service under a common Master. That would greatly facilitate sharing. But even if those in need will not change their values, they may yet have needs that must be addressed.

This brings us to the general rule laid down by the Savior: Sharing needs to be done under his instruction and in his way. That is why there is a gift of the Holy Ghost, for men are not wise enough to know how to do all things in righteousness. That is why there needs to be a priesthood structure in the Church to be an established channel of inspiration and sharing among the children of the Savior. Difficult though sharing maybe, it must be done, but in his own way by the guidance of his own Spirit. When done in the Savior it is always worthwhile to impoverish ourselves in the service of our fellowmen.

Clearly we do not need to be impoverished or poor to be servants of Christ. But we must always be *willing* to be poor. If we are already poor, we are admonished to remain poor before seeking wealth until we have obtained a hope in Christ. Thus we must be willing to be poor. If we have wealth, we must be willing to share our wealth with our brethren to the point that they are equal with us in physical wealth; if we have many brethren, our wealth may help many only a little, leaving us and everyone else in relative poverty. Sometimes our mission in life may cause us to be impecunious, as are some persons who spend most of their lives on a series of missions, or who may be dedicated to an enterprise which completely drains them financially, such as sustaining a fledgling educational institution. Or they may be moved to contribute heavily to the construction of a new temple, and making that contribution leaves them impoverished.

The general principle is, of course, that all we have is at the Lord's disposal. Whenever he instructs us to give it all away to the cause of righteousness, we gladly do so, knowing that we are pleasing our Master and furthering his work. We cannot be faithful servants of Christ unless we are willing to be poor, even as he, the Father of Heaven and Earth, was willing to be poor to fulfill his earthly ministry in righteousness.

But who can look so dispassionately on material possessions as to count them nothing dear when the time comes to be stripped of them? This is not easy for most mortals. It surely is not the natural inclination of the vast majority of mankind. But it must be the attitude of all who are true followers of Jesus Christ.

The true followers of Jesus Christ know that the only riches worth counting are the riches of eternity. They know that all flesh is as grass and will be gone tomorrow. They know that God is good, and amply rewards the faithful for any sacrifice of worldly goods they might make. They trust completely in the wisdom of their Master, having tried him and having found him to be trustworthy in every particular. So their faith commends only one thing as the first priority in their lives: Seek first for a hope in Christ before doing *anything* else.

The time called "youth" is looked upon by the world as a time of freedom from responsibility, a time of learning, of indulging, of exploration before settling into the sacrifices and rigors of adulthood. That largely perverse view is a very poor preparation for adult, responsible life for most of its adherents. No wonder so many want to be supported by society throughout their lives, or to be perpetual students, or to indulge their ever increasing desire for pleasure, or to avoid the responsibility of family and a productive life.

The ideal pattern for Latter-day Saint youth would seem to be that of the life of Jacob himself, who in his youth sought for a hope in Christ and found it. As a youth he beheld the glory of the Savior (2 Nephi 2:4). Then Jacob could ask for anything and know that he would receive it because of the promise of his God. If we become pure and spotless, we may ask whatsoever we will and

we will receive it, for we will not ask amiss (D&C 46:30). We will ask to be able to succor the weak, the helpless, the poor, the abused, the ignorant, the hopeless. The riches of both time and eternity are standing ready to be given to the faithful to minister to the needs of the poor of all nations, kindreds, tongues and peoples if only the covenant servants of Jesus Christ will seek first for the kingdom of heaven and for a hope in their Beloved Master before they seek for anything else.

The real problem is not with riches, of course. The real problem is with hearts. When our hearts are not pure, we cannot love with a pure love. We cannot love the Savior as we should, nor can we love our neighbors as we should. The Savior came to save us from this deficit of love by extending the arms of mercy, through our own faith and repentance, to each of us.

Why do some of us resist? Is it not because we somehow see ourselves as being sufficient as we are? Do we not believe in our hearts that we are already good enough, that the Savior may indeed have to forgive us of a few things, but his love and generosity will easily take care of those things and we will then be ushered ceremoniously into the blessings of the great beyond? (2 Nephi 28:7-9). Such a belief is what the scriptures call pride. It is the belief that *we* are good, though perhaps our deeds are not. This is the belief that the old us does not need to die and become a new creature, but only our garments need to be cleansed. In pride we see ourselves as eternal creatures who may need to be forgiven and lifted up by Jesus Christ, but who do not need to be essentially changed by him. We do not need that new and pure heart which only he can give to us.

My understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that no mortals are just and righteous enough of themselves to go to the same kingdom as Jesus Christ unless they are remade in the image of Christ, heart and mind, body and soul. For without that pure heart, that charity, we are nothing (Moroni 7:44), and can, of ourselves, do no good thing (John 15:1-5). We must cease to exist as the old selfish persons we were and take upon ourselves new hearts and new minds.

Then in the humility of being salvaged from damnation by the Savior's love, we will never again consider that we are better than anyone else. Then we will know that we stand only in the grace of Christ, and will never be found looking down on anyone, including the worst sinner and Satan and his angels. We will then know our true place and being in the universe, and will say of the sinner, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

Pride is the root of our evil, the source of our selfishness, the great barrier to our salvation. It is the pride of our hearts from which we need to be saved more than from anything else. Once we are saved from that, then all good things can be added to us. Then we will see as we are seen, know as we are known, and we will be familiar and free with our substance, treating all men as brothers. Then indeed we will have heaven on earth.