

Insights on Church Leadership

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Flattery

The word "flattery" is always mentioned in the scriptures in a negative sense. In whatever social group we may find ourselves in, there will always be instances when we (or others) will congratulate someone or praise those involved in a job well done. These expressions of appreciation are sometimes called "flattery". However, there is a difference between the flattery denounced by the prophets and sincere praise, which is an appropriate expression of appreciation. The dictionary defines flattery as: insincere compliment; gratification by falsification; cajoling; beguiling. To flatter is "to play upon the vanity or susceptibilities of" someone. Here is Elder Bruce R. McConkie's definition of "flattery":

"Flattery is the act of ingratiating oneself into another's confidence by excessive praise, or by insincere speech and acts. It includes the raising of false and unfounded hopes; there is always an element of dishonesty attending it."¹

In other words, flattery is an expression of appreciation based on selfish desires of retribution, usually requiring some wicked action or behavior on the part of the flattered party. Sincere appreciation does not demand anything in return, and is based on a desire to encourage or motivate others to reach higher levels of accomplishment for the glory of God.

At this point some may think: "What is the big deal about that? I never compliment anyone desiring something in return ..." Most of us don't. However, the fact that we don't seek retribution does not guarantee that other persons will not seek some form of retribution from us, especially while we serve in leadership capacities.

This is a very serious matter. Over the years I have faced--or observed--instances where a few individuals, clearly unfamiliar with the standard procedures of the Church of Christ, addressed me or others with some of the most wonderful and eloquent words of praise. And why? Because they wanted something in return: letters of recommendation, positions of leadership, ordinances, etc. In all cases, those individuals wanted something that at least some of them knew they were not prepared--or sometimes not even worthy--to receive. Other cases involved individuals who wanted something inconvenient, inopportune, unadvisable, or in some way questionable or unethical. And they thought that by flattering me and others they might gain whatever they wanted.

How Flattery Can Be Used

Experience has shown that there is a pattern followed by those who engage in the use of flattery. Again, instead of dealing with modern examples that could wound the sensibility of other persons, I will use some of the examples found in the scriptures. In the Book of Mormon we find two cases of individuals who used flattery to try to gain positions of preeminence among the people: Sherem and Amalickiah. Notice their tactics:

"Sherem ... labored diligently that he might lead away the hearts of the people, insomuch that he did lead away many hearts; ... And he was learned, that he had a perfect knowledge of the language of the people; wherefore, he could use much flattery, and much power of speech, according to the power of the devil.²"

"Amalickiah was desirous to be a king; and those people who were ... desirous that he should be their king ... were seeking for power. And they had been led by the flatteries of Amalickiah, that if they would support him and establish him to be their king that he would make them rulers over the people. ... Yea, we see that Amalickiah, because he was a man of cunning device and a man of many flattering words, that he led away the hearts of many people to do wickedly; yea, and to seek to destroy the church of God, and to destroy the foundation of liberty which God had granted unto them, or which blessing God had sent upon the face of the land for the righteous' sake.³"

Flattering words generally address inner desires or aspirations that we, imperfect individuals, may have. This is probably the reason why flattery works so well in so many cases. In the two cases we just read, both Sherem and Amalickiah offered what the people wanted: an excuse or a rationale for committing sins, or for obtaining power and authority by illicit means; in other cases, flattering words may be directed towards our desire of recognition. But no matter what is being appealed to, the Apostle James explained that we are allured by something from within us: "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed."⁴

Another common characteristic in the use of flattery is the manner used to address the person or persons being flattered. Sherem tried to allure Jacob by calling him "Brother Jacob"; Amalickiah acknowledged the hunger for power of the enemies of freedom of his day as appropriate. Over a century later, on the old world, when the Pharisees tried to entrap the Savior, they sometimes started by complimenting him using words like: "... Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men."⁵ After such kind words, ho would not feel an urge to respond in the same level of kindness?

While serving in leadership positions we may at times be approached by individuals who will compliment us in a rather exaggerated manner: "Brother or sister ____ you are the best teacher in the entire

² Jacob 7:1,3-4

³ Alma 46:4-5,10

⁴ James 1:13-14

⁵ Matthew 22:16

church⁶. You should be the one presiding here. I wonder why you were not chosen ..." Then, after such splendid words, unlawful requests may come that would be similar to these: "... we would see a sign from thee⁷", or "... What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?⁸"

An unwise and perhaps naive individual could easily be led into the belief that those tempting him or her are "friends," and might fall into the trap of agreeing with them by showing a sign or falling into a "doctrinal trap" just to avoid arguing with an apparent "friend." Christ, however, always maintained an eternal perspective in his responses. When asked to show a sign he refused⁹--even knowing that that might be the last time those men would call him "Master," and that he probably would not make any converts among them. When asked to mix religion with partisan politics or public policy, he avoided the temptation of engaging in a long and pointless quarrel.

The Search for Earthly Honors

Another serious mistake is to use our positions in the Church acquire the honors of men. Once again, the Lord himself set the example:

"... when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, [they] said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world. When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone.¹⁰"

Even being the lawful heir to the throne of David, Jesus Christ did not accept that earthly honor¹¹. Speaking to the multitudes and to his disciples, he warned against feelings of self-aggrandizement:

"Beware of the scribes, which desire to walk in long robes, and love greetings in the markets, ... and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi ... and the highest seats in the synagogues, and the chief rooms at feasts¹²".

Again, we see the keyword "desire". Christ was not condemning the receipt of earthly honors; he warned, though, against those who would make those honors the motive behind their service in the kingdom. One tragic case we can find in the scriptures was that of the Prophet Balaam. He received messengers from Balak, king of Moab, who wanted him to curse the Israelites. In Balaam's day many wise men would desire the honor of one day being called directly by a king to perform some special task. Thus,

⁶ I would be very cautious in using superlatives like "the best," "the greatest," "the most powerful," in relation to church units, organizations, programs, general authorities or other individuals. First of all because we don't know whether that is true--and in most cases it probably isn't. And secondly because we have no need to make comparisons among ourselves. We should say, or better, think: "Let God be the judge and reward each one of us according to his perfect wisdom."

⁷ Matthew 12:38

⁸ Matthew 22:17

⁹ Matthew 12:39; those individuals probably wanted to witness a great miracle, but the Lord promised them an even greater one--his own resurrection. However, just like it had happened with the Prophet Jonas (Jonah 1:15,17), this greater miracle, the resurrection, would not be performed in front of an audience (Luke 24:1-3).

¹⁰ John 6:14-15; brackets added.

¹¹ John 18:36

¹² Matthew 23:6; Luke 20:46

Balaam was probably having the chance of his life before him. After consulting the Lord--who told him he could not curse his covenant people--Balaam refused to go with Balak's messengers.

However, the words spoken by the messengers were probably echoing in Balaam's mind; after all, Balak acknowledged Balaam's power, "... I [know] that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed."¹³ Besides, he had been visited by the elders of both the Moabites and the Midianites. What a great honor ...

But, surprise! Another group of messengers, in greater number and of higher status in the kingdom, come to him delivering this message: "... Let nothing, I pray thee, hinder thee from coming unto me: For I will promote thee unto very great honour, and I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me: come therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people."¹⁴

Poor Balaam ... I can imagine the tremendous pressure in his mind: 'Balak, the king, praying, begging me to come ... Promising me perhaps a position as one of his chief counselors ... Oh, the honor, the reputation, the fame, the admiration and reverence from all the people ...

Insisting with the Lord, Balaam got this answer: "If the men come to call thee, rise up, if thou will go with them; but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, shalt thou speak. And Balaam rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab."¹⁵

The Lord's answer requires some attention. It is that same type of speech he used to say "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it ..."¹⁶ Yes, we have our free agency and we may choose for ourselves, even though we may later regret making a wrong choice. In Balaam's case, he had already heard the word of the Lord not to curse the people; since all Balak wanted was to have the Israelites cursed, why should he go with Balak's messengers anyway¹⁷?

Perhaps Balaam rationalized thinking that if he would talk personally to Balak he might make the king change his mind about cursing the Israelites; after all, Balak had promised that he would do whatever Balaam would tell him--perhaps even accept the discussions, be baptized, and also issue a proclamation to have his people do the same. And who knows? The king might still reward him for speaking the word of the Lord, although, as a humble prophet he would not accept any earthly honors ... maybe just a good job with a fat salary ... but still, just to keep the Lord's commandment of eating bread with the sweat of one's face ... with air-conditioning.

If that was Balaam's plan, it was doomed to failure, because in these last days the Lord revealed the following:

¹³ Numbers 22:6; brackets added for clarification (based on a footnote for this verse in the LDS edition of the King James Version of the Bible).

¹⁴ Numbers 22:16-17

¹⁵ JST Numbers 22:20-21. Note the difference from the King James Version in the clause: "... if thou will go with them ..."; once more, 'desire' is the keyword.

¹⁶ Moses 3:17

¹⁷ It is interesting to notice how this situation relates to the one lived by the Prophet Joseph Smith regarding the loss of 116 pages of manuscript translated from the plates. See History of the Church 1:20; also D&C sections 3 and 10.

"... although a man may have many revelations, and have the power to do many mighty works, yet if he boasts in his own strength, and sets at naught the counsels of God, and follows after the dictates of his own will and carnal desires, he must fall and incur the vengeance of a just God upon him.¹⁸"

Balaam followed the inspiration of the Almighty, and blessed Israel three times, incurring in Balak's anger: "... now flee thou to thy place: I thought to promote thee unto great honour; but, lo, the Lord hath kept thee back from honour.¹⁹"

Wow! What terrible words! Imagine, to have the mighty king say--perhaps in front of all the princes, court counselors, and reporters: "Balaam, you are fired! Get out of here! I don't care what your religion says! All I wanted was to have you get those people off my back, and you didn't do it!"

But, wait a minute! The Lord did not say to Balaam that he should not reveal to Balak under what conditions Israel would receive those blessings he prophesied, nor under what conditions they might lose them ... Therefore, Balaam "... taught [Balak] to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.²⁰"

Whether Balaam received the honors promised by Balak, is still unknown; the fact is that the judgment of God fell upon him²¹ because he used his priesthood for personal gain.

In review, these are two lessons we learn from the tragic case of Balaam: (1) we must never exercise the priesthood for personal gain (money, honor, prestige, status--first seats in the synagogues, or whatever else it may please us); and (2) we must not go against the will of the Lord because the fear of men²², or because the lusts of the flesh²³, neither to "please the crowd²⁴" and gain popularity.

Escaping the Lure of Flattering Words

As it happens with all virtues to be acquired and all weaknesses to be avoided, the key is in our own minds. There is no magic; the power is within us all the time. The effects of flattering words can be prevented by first, not judging people by their appearance or their eloquence alone:

"But the Lord said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.²⁵"

18 D&C 3:4

19 Numbers 24:11

20 Revelation 2:14; brackets added. See also Numbers 31:16.

21 Numbers 31:8

22 D&C 3:7-8

23 D&C 88:121

24 Exodus 23:2

25 1 Samuel 16:7

"The simple believeth every word: but the prudent man looketh well to his going."²⁶

Secondly, whenever we are faced with a request that we can't see anything wrong with, but that we still don't feel like doing it anyway, let us take the time to ask for the counsel of the Lord. This is very important: whenever we don't feel like doing something we have been asked by someone, or whenever for some unknown reason we don't feel comfortable doing it, or whenever we are afraid of doing it, *then we shouldn't do it!* We shouldn't be afraid of losing the initial approval of the people. People, in general, like to see their leaders making quick decisions; however, they will be the first ones to turn against their leaders if the decisions are later found to be wrong or questionable.

Except in emergencies, when the decisions have to be made hastily, it might always be wise to take some time to ponder about major decisions, and never submit ourselves to the will of a flatterer. Exactly for not doing this, Joshua and the leaders of his day made a treaty of peace with the deceiving Gibeonites²⁷, in disagreement with a previous commandment of the Lord.

We must practice integrity at all costs, like Micaiah²⁸, Abinadi²⁹, and many other martyrs who would not yield to fear, nor pervert the word of the Lord either to become popular before the people or to even to save their lives. We may find it easier to resist flattery if always keep in mind that we live in a temporary environment³⁰, where all offices, distinctions, ranks, classes, titles, and honors are as the "flower of the field."³¹

²⁶ Proverbs 14:15

²⁷ Joshua 9:14-16,18

²⁸ 2 Chronicles 18:6-7, 26-27

²⁹ Mosiah 17:9-20

³⁰ See chapter 3 for some insights on the temporary nature of our mortal environment.

³¹ Isaiah 40:6-8; James 1:10; 1 John 2:15-17; D&C 124:7

About the Author



Marcus Helvécio Tourinho de Assis Martins is a native of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in July, 1972. In August of 1978 he became the first black member to serve as a full-time missionary for the Church in the 20th century, serving in the Brazil São Paulo North Mission.

Since then, brother Martins served as bishop, counselor in branch presidencies, member of stake high councils, stake and ward executive secretary, high priests group leader, ward mission leader, temple officiator, stake and ward sunday school president, and teacher in primary, sunday school, and institute of religion. In the early 1980's he also translated the “Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ” into Portuguese.

Brother Martins has worked over the years as a systems analyst and independent consultant for the Brazilian government and a number of private corporations. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion, Race and Ethnic Relations, a Master's degree in Organizational Behavior, and a bachelor's in Business Management. He taught religion and sociology classes at Brigham Young University, Ricks College, and currently serves as chair of the department of religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii.

He and Sister Mirian Barbosa Martins, herself a native of Petrópolis, Brazil, and a returned missionary with several years of leadership experience, have four children: Flávio, Natália, Felipe, and Cristina.