

“Because He First Loved Us”

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In the early chapters of Mosiah, King Benjamin asked his son to gather the people to the temple so that the king could address them. Mosiah sent a proclamation throughout the land, and great numbers of people assembled. As they arrived, they pitched their tents round about with the doors facing the temple. The people were organized by family with father, mother, children, and grandchildren grouped together. (See Mosiah 2:5–6.) In every dispensation of time, the family and home have been recognized as the basic unit in the kingdom and the foundation of a righteous life. It was no less in Nephite days.

During his discourse King Benjamin counseled parents with regard to their duties. He advised them of their responsibility to feed and clothe their little ones and to teach their children the commandments and help them live peaceably with each other. He then concluded that part of the speech with the theme chosen for this conference. His conclusion referred to the higher law and presented the greatest responsibility and challenge that parents have. From Mosiah 4:15 we read: “Ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another.”

King Benjamin’s counsel is similar to that given by the Lord in our day when he revealed that parents in Zion are to teach their children

gospel principles and should teach them “to pray, and to walk uprightly before the Lord” (D&C 68:25–28). You may remember that the Lord chastised the Prophet Joseph Smith and other brethren because they had not taught their “children light and truth,” and he instructed them to set their houses in order (D&C 93:42–50). Parents, enlightened by the gospel, are under the Lord’s command to exemplify and teach their children the fundamentals of the gospel. And the greatest commandment is to “love one another” as Jesus loves us (John 13:34–35). Teaching begins at birth and is especially important in the early years when children are impressionable and feelings and patterns of behavior are formed.

In rare cases children learn to love others in spite of parental behavior and inadequate teaching. Generally, however, the lessons are learned best in a home where parents love each other and express love for their children. President McKay stated that a home to be worthy of its name must be characterized by love. He said:

Merrill J. Bateman was the president of Brigham Young University when this address was given at the Family Expo Conference on 6 April 1998.

Every home has both body and spirit. You may have a beautiful house, with all the decorations that modern art can give, or wealth bestow. You may have all the outward forms that will please the eye, and yet not have a home. It is not home without love. It may be a hovel, a log hut, a tent, a wikeup, if you have the right spirit within, the true love of Christ, and love for one another—fathers and mothers for the children, children for parents, husband and wife for each other—you have the true life of the home that Latter-day Saints build, and which they are striving to establish. [David O. McKay, Conference Report, October 1907, p. 63]

Most, if not all, agree that love is the key ingredient in child development. From where does love come? Is it a divine inheritance? Is it a gift of the Spirit and, therefore, a function of a righteous life? Can it be learned? Can we acquire it from others? Is an understanding of the plan of salvation important to the development of love? Are service and sacrifice key requirements in its cultivation? I believe the answer to each question is “yes!”

I wish to discuss four ways in which parents can teach their children to love and serve one another. The first is for parents to magnify their divine inheritance by exemplifying love and service to each other and to their children. The second is to teach children the gospel emphasizing the making and keeping of baptismal, priesthood, and temple covenants. The third is to provide opportunities for sons and daughters to serve. The fourth is to teach children the meaning of the Atonement. Although this last step is an integral part of the second (i.e., teaching the gospel), the Atonement is the greatest act of love and service in the history of mankind, and a testimony of the Savior’s redemptive role generates humility, faith, repentance, and love.

The Influence of Parental Love

Moses taught that men and women are created in God’s image. Genesis reads: “God

created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (Genesis 1:27). Paul taught the Athenians at Mars’ Hill that we are God’s offspring (see Acts 17:29). Men and women, sons and daughters of deity, inherit divine attributes in embryo. The consummate attribute is charity, or the pure love of Christ. Consequently, each of us has within our soul a seed that, if nourished, will sprout into warm, intense feelings for parents, brothers and sisters, our children, the Savior, and others. The question is: “How is the seed nourished so that it will flower and grow?”

The key relationship in a family is that between husband and wife. President James E. Faust stated: “The relationship between husband and wife is the linchpin . . . in the whole family relationship” (“Psychotherapists: Love Your Wives,” *AMCAP Journal* 16, no. 1 [1990]: 53). The dictionary defines a linchpin as “a locking pin inserted in the end of a shaft . . . a central or cohesive element” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, p. 759). It holds everything together.

The husband-wife relationship is key in the development of children, as the mother and father play a pivotal role in modeling appropriate behavior and nurturing children’s feelings. Love between the father and mother establishes identity and self-respect in children. In contrast, a child’s identity and feelings of security are threatened when parents argue and condemn one another. President McKay often repeated the saying, “A father can do no greater thing for his children than to let them feel that he loves their mother” (see *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1997], p. 201). In the home children experience the bonds of love when they see and feel their father’s affection for their mother and the mother’s genuine concern for the father. When a husband shows respect for his wife, children learn respect for parents and for each other.

Another key relationship in the home is that between parents and children. The finest example of love is the mother's love for her children—a divine inheritance. President James E. Faust stated: "I am also sorry that I have not sooner appreciated the great sublime, unique gifts which our wives inherit from divinity. I speak of their womanly intuitions and their six senses, and their steadfast faith and capacity to love" ("Psychotherapists," p. 53).

If a woman has any degree of spiritual maturity, there is an instinctive love for her newborn child. She sees the infant as a prized gift from eternity, and the intensity of her feelings is almost overwhelming. She has passed near death to bring the newborn into the world and would sacrifice her own life to protect it. In the early years the infant's dependence bonds the mother and child to each other. There is a spiritual dimension to the bonding.

Recently a young woman contemplating marriage asked my daughter, a married woman with five children, what it was like being a mother. In particular, she asked, "What do you do all day?" She wanted a description of a typical day in a mother's life. The question bothered my daughter because it missed the essence of motherhood. My daughter told the young woman: "You can follow me around all day and do the same tasks, but you will not have the same experience! You will be performing physical tasks but miss out on the spiritual dimension of motherhood that makes all the difference."

As a child develops and the dependence lessens, the love or intense, affectionate concern for a son or daughter does not diminish but takes on new dimensions. Often there is less concern for the physical but more consideration for the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual challenges. Still, physical needs are always part of the picture.

A few weeks ago, while attending a stake conference in California, Sister Bateman and I listened to a new convert bear witness of the

love she has for her son as well as for the Restoration and the healing power of the priesthood. Her introduction to the missionaries was unusual, and her story illustrates the powerful love of a mother for her young boy. The relevant portion of the sister's testimony is as follows:

It began last year when my son shattered his arm. We were told that it would be months before we would know if he would ever . . . use it again. We were devastated. There is nothing more painful than seeing your child suffer.

The day after Sean came home from the hospital, I saw two missionaries walking by our house. I knew Mormons were good people with strong faith, so I asked if they would come in and pray for my son.

They gave him a blessing with oil. I could feel the power of the Spirit in the room. Within days we began to see signs of improvement! Even the doctor was amazed.

The missionaries would stop by regularly to see how Sean's arm was doing. We would talk about this miracle and about God. The Spirit was always strong when we would talk. I told them that I did not intend on becoming a Mormon and was afraid I was wasting their time. They assured me it was not a problem. They continued to stop by, and we began the discussions. I could not deny the spirit that was with us each night as we held discussions.

I still had doubts. I would ask them, "How do I know that the Book of Mormon is true? How do I know it is not just a good book?"

The missionaries said, "Don't take our word for it. Pray and ask God if it is true. He cannot lead you astray. Ask with a sincere heart and real intent." They wrote a note in my book that said "read/ponder/pray."

I prayed and read, and, later, as I lay pondering this question, a very powerful sensation filled my chest. It startled me. It was a very physical, very tangible experience. This physical sensation was accompanied by a spiritual enlightenment as well.

Nothing else would have been able to cut through my doubt. This experience was very moving.

I was afraid the missionaries might think I was a little strange when I told them about this experience, but they opened their books to scriptures that described my experience exactly and indicated that the next step was to be baptized. [Letter and testimony received from Laura L. MacKenzie on March 4, 1998]

The good sister had a number of challenges to overcome before she was baptized, but the divine light within and her conversion experience more than compensated for the roadblocks placed in her way. My purpose in telling the story relates to the mother's feelings for her son and the motivating power unleashed by her love. The mother had seen missionaries before but had never sought their help or even engaged them in conversation. From her statement one may assume that faithful LDS members had crossed her path. She, too, was a woman of faith. She believed in the power of prayer. And just as Cornelius was prompted by the Holy Ghost to seek help from Peter (see Acts 10), this good woman undoubtedly received a spiritual prompting to approach the missionaries.

But where did the courage come from to heed the prompting? The mother's special love combined with despair for her son's health provided the strength to move beyond the normal boundaries that circumscribed her actions. The intense concern for the son caused her to seek help from two strangers. Would this woman have approached the missionaries if the crushed arm had been her own? Perhaps, but not likely. The intense feelings inherited and developed for her son were the motivating force. The son's suffering gnawed at the mother's heartstrings. She was concerned about the boy's future. Would it include a lifeless limb? Would a useless arm inhibit him in other ways? Her concerns transcended her reluctance.

The intense, affectionate concerns of a parent for a child, especially a mother's deep feelings for her offspring, are a divine inheritance. They are part of the light brought from the pre-mortal world. Since light responds to light, the divine spark of love in the heart of a child is lit by the candle flame burning brightly within the soul of a mother or father.

Another important relationship in a family is that between children themselves. Often an older brother or sister will come to the aid of a younger sibling in a show of love and concern. If there is any doubt about love as a divine inheritance, consider a brief *Reader's Digest* story shared by Sister Sharon G. Larsen at the recent Young Women conference. The story is about

twin girls, Brielle and Kyrie, who were born prematurely. "They were placed in separate incubators to reduce the risk of infection. Kyrie, the larger sister at two pounds three ounces, quickly began gaining weight and calmly slept. But Brielle, who weighed only two pounds at birth, could not keep up with her."

*Sister Larsen said Brielle's condition became critical as her oxygen intake plummeted and her heart rate soared. "Then the nurse remembered a procedure she had heard about. The parents consented, and the nurse slipped the squirming baby into the incubator with the bigger sister. No sooner had the door of the incubator closed than Brielle snuggled up to Kyrie and calmed right down. Within minutes Brielle's blood-oxygen readings were the best they had been since she was born. As she dozed, Kyrie wrapped her tiny arm around her smaller sibling." ["Protect Families from Anger, Strife," *Church News*, 4 April 1998, p. 5]*

One might argue that the relationship formed in the womb was the reason why Brielle snuggled up to her sister and why Kyrie wrapped her arm around her smaller twin. Even then, the bonding reflects a divine spark in both children that reaches back into the eternities.

The Righteous Life and Love as a Fruit of the Spirit

In addition to exposing children to parental love and love from others, the Lord has established a second way to increase children's sensitivity and concern. It is for parents to teach gospel principles and guide their children in living righteously. The attribute of love brought from the first estate will then be added upon by the Holy Ghost. The apostle Paul states that love is a fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22). Gifts from the Holy Spirit are conditional. One must strive to live righteously in order to enjoy blessings from this member of the Godhead (see D&C 46:9). Alma told his son Shiblon, "Bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love" (Alma 38:11–12). This lesson is particularly important for teenagers who mistake passion for love. In speaking of the presumption made by some teenagers about love, President Hinckley's words are appropriate: "Their expression may sound genuine, but their coin is counterfeit" (*Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley*, p. 316).

It is important for parents to teach children about covenants, to help them understand two-way promises. Children should understand the basics of their promises to the Lord and the Lord's promises to them before they participate in an ordinance. It is important to note that every covenant includes a promise to serve others. In the baptismal covenant a young boy or girl promises to bear others' burdens, to mourn with and comfort those in need, and to stand as a witness of God (see Mosiah 18:8–10). In exchange the Lord promises to remit sins, provide the Holy Ghost as a companion, and open the door to the celestial kingdom (see 2 Nephi 31:17–21, D&C 20:37, John 3:3–8). Parents should teach their children about the obligation they have taken upon themselves and provide appropriate opportunities for children to serve in the home, family, neighborhood, and church.

The oath and covenant of the priesthood requires faithfulness of young and not-so-young men if they are to receive it, and then the holder is expected to magnify his priesthood callings. Faithfulness requires service to others. Callings entail service to others. To magnify or enlarge one's calling suggests greater and greater service. In exchange the Lord opens the door to eternal life and to all that he has (D&C 84:34–41; 88:21; 124:28, 34, 42).

Multiple promises are made in the temple endowment. Two, in particular, are directly linked to service. The first is a willingness to sacrifice in order to build the kingdom, and the second is a pledge to consecrate one's time and resources to the Lord. Young men and women should be prepared by parents and Church leaders to enter into these promises before participating in the endowment. One sign of their readiness would be a history of faithful payment of tithes and offerings. Other signs would be fulfillment of home teaching assignments by young men and completion of service projects by young women as outlined in their Personal Progress program. Another sign would be participation in temple ordinances wherein young people also learn to serve others.

Teaching Children to Love Through Service

Love and service are interdependent. Acts of service are reflections of the heart, but those acts also serve to deepen one's feelings. Service rendered others is, in large measure, determined by the feelings we have for them. But the more we serve, the greater is our love. The patriarch Jacob's love for Rachel was reflected in his willingness to serve her father, Laban, for years. When Jacob received Rachel's hand, the scriptures record: "They seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her" (Genesis 29:20). I suspect, also, that his love deepened as a result of his many years of service. She became even more precious to him.

This same cycle occurs in the mission field. The great blessing of a mission is that it teaches

young men and women to love and to serve. It instills within them and solidifies the meaning of love. Have you ever heard a missionary say that his or her mission is the best in the world? In our family I tell my children that the British Mission is the only real mission. My eldest son tells me I am wrong. The best mission is Canada Montreal, where true Quebecois is spoken. My second son says that we are both wrong. It is Japan Tokyo North. The Japanese people are the greatest in the world. My third son tells us that it is unfortunate that Russia was not open to missionary work when we were called. The Russian people are the best. From his vantage point, the greatest missionary experiences are to be found in the Russia Moscow and Russia Novosibirsk Missions. My fourth son tells his older brothers and me that the finest people in all the world are found in the Spain Malaga Mission. Their Spanish is pure and the culture is wonderful. And when you find converts, they are the best. Finally, my daughter Melisa says, “You men are all wrong! The greatest mission is Argentina Cordoba!”

Why do almost all missionaries, upon their return, feel they served in the best mission and among the best people on earth? Because the Holy Ghost blessed them with the gift of love as they worked hard and served faithfully (see D&C 4, Galatians 5:22). In other words, the Holy Spirit planted in their hearts special feelings for the people as they met with and taught them. Can you imagine a missionary being an effective teacher if he disliked the people or was indifferent in his feelings? The Holy Ghost softens the missionary’s heart and becomes a true companion to those who are faithful and hardworking.

As a stake president a few years ago, I asked each homecoming missionary to tell me about his or her mission. If they began with the words “It’s the greatest mission on earth!” I knew they had served faithfully and had received the special gift to which they were entitled.

It is no different today than in Book of Mormon times. When Ammon went among the Lamanites to begin his mission, he was captured and taken to the king. King Lamoni inquired of Ammon “if it were his desire to dwell in the land among the Lamanites.” Ammon replied, “Yea, I desire to dwell among this people for a time; yea, and perhaps until the day I die” (Alma 17:22–23). Although Ammon did not spend the rest of his life in Lamanite country, he did spend his remaining days serving the people. Following his mission he was told by the Lord to lead his converts to safety. He took them back to Zarahemla, where they were eventually given the land of Jershon and became the people of Ammon.

The truth of the matter is that although a missionary returns home, he often leaves his heart in the mission field. Feelings of love for those served linger long after the mission is completed. The cycle of love begetting service and service increasing love is not unique to the mission field, but this circular process coupled with testimony is the basis of successful missionary work and a successful life.

Love, Service, and the Atonement of Christ

The greatest act of love and service in the history of mankind is the atoning sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father. In Jesus’ explanation to Nicodemus of the path one takes to obtain eternal life, he said, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). It was an act in which the most intense, affectionate concern was shown for the entire human family. The Father had promised his spirit children in the premortal world that he would provide a way for them to return to his presence following an earthly sojourn. Agency was part of the inheritance; he knew we would sin, and a cleansing and sanctifying process was required.

The “way” was an infinite and eternal sacrifice (see Alma 34:10, 14). Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). The Son was willing to “bleed at every pore,” to experience sins and “pains and afflictions and temptations” of all mankind in order to know how to succor us in the flesh, to “draw” us to him so that the Father could lift us up (D&C 19:18, Alma 7:11–12, 3 Nephi 27:14–15). The eternal nature of the Atonement’s depth is matched by its infinite breadth.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell calls the Atonement “the greatest act of service in all of history” (*All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1979], p. 63). On another occasion he termed it “the central fact of human history” (*Behold, I Say unto You, I Cannot Say the Smallest Part Which I Feel* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1973], p. 44). In still other settings he has called it the “eternal linchpin,” i.e., the event that ties together the premortal, mortal, and postmortal worlds and makes eternal life possible (Meetings in Japan and Korea, 1993–94). It is the central event upon which every righteous outcome depends. The Atonement is the key message of every prophet in every dispensation. Most principles, laws, ordinances, miracles, and covenants given by the Lord are types and shadows of the Atonement and illustrate its dimensions and impact (see 2 Nephi 11:4).

As the Last Supper was coming to a close and just prior to the experience in Gethsemane, Jesus offered a prayer in behalf of his disciples. At the beginning he stated that the process of obtaining eternal life is one of coming to know the Father and the Son (see John 17:3). Ultimately, in order to know a person, one must become like them. The apostle John records:

And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. . . .

Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that,

when he shall appear, we shall be like him. [1 John 2:3, 3:2]

I firmly believe that the more we know about his life and, in particular, the Atonement, the more we will love him, desire to keep his commandments, and appreciate what he has done for us. In the process we will be blessed with his divine attributes. Our faith in him will increase; we will be true to the trust he has given us; we will enjoy an inner strength to control our desires; our capacity to endure will grow; our bodies and spirits will become sanctified by the Holy Spirit; and our love for those around us and, eventually, for all of God’s children will increase. As we acquire these characteristics, we will be, in Peter’s words, “neither . . . barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:3–8).

Parents should use the scriptures to teach their children, young and old, about the Savior. We hope that our children and youth will know that Abel sacrificed the firstlings of the flock as a reminder that Jesus is the firstborn in the spirit and the first to be resurrected (see Genesis 4:4; John 1:1; Colossians 1:15, 18). We hope that our people will recognize the Israelite sacrifice of the “lamb without blemish” as a symbol of Christ’s offering for sin and his innocence and perfect character (1 Peter 1:19; see also Exodus 12:5). The manna from heaven provided for the children of Israel should remind us that Christ is the bread of life and that through him we receive the food of eternal life (see Exodus 16:15, John 6:32–35). Moses smiting the rock to obtain water for Israel teaches us that Christ is the fountain of life, and his living water (the gospel) quenches our thirst forever (see Exodus 17:6, John 4:7–14). The blood of Israel’s sacrificial lambs reminds us that Christ bled from every pore in Gethsemane and that his blood was spilled on the cross as the price for our sins (see Exodus 12:21, 24:8; Luke 22:44; D&C 19:18).

The brass serpent Moses raised in the wilderness was a representation of Christ being raised upon the cross. Moses promised Israel that they would live if they would look upon the brass serpent after having been bitten by the poisonous snakes. In like manner, those who exercise faith in Christ by looking upon him as their Savior are promised life everlasting, for they will be cleansed of the venomous subtleties and poisons of the serpent that slithered in the first garden (see Genesis 3:1–4, John 3:14–15).

The apostle John states that Jesus turned water into “good” wine at the marriage feast in Cana “and manifested forth his glory” (John 2:10–11). The glory of the Father and Son is “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). How does the changing of water to wine show forth the Savior’s glory? Through the Atonement of Christ, his “good blood” changes God’s children from mortals to immortals, from corruptible to incorruptible beings. The apostle Paul told the Corinthians that we are “sown in corruption [but] raised in incorruption: . . . sown in dishonour [but]

raised in glory: . . . sown in weakness [but] raised in power” (1 Corinthians 15:42–43). Just as the house of Israel drank “the pure blood of the grape” in remembrance of their rock of salvation (Deuteronomy 32:14–15) and the revelers at the marriage feast were provided with the best wine, so we also drink the sacramental water as a reminder that the best blood spilled in Gethsemane and on Calvary has the power to lift and perfect us.

The greatest act of love in the history of the world is the atoning sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father. The Atonement reveals the intense feelings of both the Father and the Son for all mankind. As a type, one might think of Abraham’s and Isaac’s feelings on Mount Moriah. Jesus taught Nicodemus about the Father’s love: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16). And Jesus taught the Twelve about his own love: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12–13). If we and our children learn about the Lord’s life and sacrifice, we will love him “because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).