

“My Soul Delighteth in Plainness unto My People, That They May Learn”

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Nephi said, “My soul delighteth in plainness unto my people, that they may learn” (2 Nephi 25:4). He later explains that “after this manner doth the Lord God work among the children of men” (2 Nephi 31:3). The Lord truly does work according to plainness. *Plain* means pure, clear, uncomplicated, honest, simple, and without ornamentation (*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. “plain”). Sometimes in the worldly scope of things *plain* has picked up a derogatory sense, meaning ordinary, not pretty, or old-fashioned, but it does not carry this sense in the eternal scope of our Heavenly Father. It is His way. In Genesis 25:27 Jacob of old is called a “plain man”; according to the accompanying footnote in the Church’s 1979 edition of the Bible, *plain* here means whole, complete, perfect, and simple. The gospel of Jesus Christ is plain in the same way as was Jacob. Its principles and commandments are taught in powerful, plain, simple, honest ways by the Lord and His prophets. As we look closely at the scriptures, we see that directives are given in three main areas: living with plainness, teaching with plainness, and speaking with plainness. By following these principles, we can become more whole, complete, and perfect.

Living with Plainness

We are told in the scriptures that we can live with more plainness, simplifying our lives. We can live with fewer material wants, freeing up our resources for something better, for something more lasting. The Lord Himself advises us in the Sermon on the Mount:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, . . .

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. [Matthew 6:19–21]

It is beneficial for all of us to examine periodically where we spend our time and money and realize that this denotes the state of our hearts. As we adapt to simplicity, we feel more joy and gratitude. We appreciate more fully what we already have. Can we run around a

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little less with empty busyness, cancel a few of the talent lessons our children don't really like, and find a little more productive time to do the important things? Can we better prioritize what is most essential in serving the needs and goals of our family? Sometimes our search for less gives us more in our quest for perfection and eternal goals.

Alma counsels his son Helaman, "Now ye may suppose that this is foolishness in me; but behold I say unto you, that by small and simple things are great things brought to pass" (Alma 37:6). Some may still suppose it foolish today, but it is the truth. As we make these words our guide to living, our lives will open up and we will recognize miracles. We will see the lifting that comes from a smile or a kind word, the benefits of simple service. We will understand the true meaning of visiting and home teaching as loving shepherding, without all of the unneeded extras.

I once was told a story of a woman who couldn't do her visiting teaching because she hadn't finished embroidering the cloths that were to go with her homemade bread that went along with her lesson. She missed the whole month. She also missed the simple principle of visiting teaching. The simple acts of listening, discussing gospel principles in solving life's problems, and building trusting friendships are what visiting teaching is really about. Having someone to go to when we need help, having a friend to laugh with, and sometimes having someone to cry with are all parts of the miracles of small and simple things.

In our families our greatest goals can be accomplished by simple means. By searching the memories of our own childhood and by being a little creative, we can make old-fashioned joys new again. Let's have fun without modern technology and without money. We can turn off the television and the movies. Let's read to our children, all cuddled up on the couch together. We can share the stories we read when we were children and laugh

and remember. We could go to the library, come back with armfuls of books, and later tell each other what we've learned. We can take a walk around the block or in the yard and put nature's treasures in a brown paper bag. Let's talk and listen, play a board game, pop popcorn. We should appreciate the blessings that plainness can give your family.

Recently my husband and I made an unannounced visit to the home of a young couple with four small sons. They were all around the kitchen table, decorating cookies to give secretly to neighbors. The mother replenished the cookies and frosting and supplied a wide variety of leftover candy and sprinkles from past birthday parties and baking projects. The father sat with his sons—frosting, decorating, and being creative—sharing the fun and excitement over each treat. The love between them was strong. They enjoyed each other's company. They were best friends. This wasn't anything fancy, expensive, or complicated. It was simple. It was plain. It wasn't terribly unusual, and I'm sure that they have done many of these kinds projects together before. But it worked. Such simple things build family unity, trust, and love.

Our prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley, along with other prophets before, has asked us to have family home evening weekly. Clear back in 1915, when the program began, President Joseph F. Smith stated, "If the Saints obey this counsel, we promise that great blessings will result. Love at home and obedience to parents will increase. Faith will be developed in the hearts of the youth of Israel, and they will gain power to combat the evil influence and temptations which beset them" (In James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75], 4:338–39). "By small and simple things are great things brought to pass" (Alma 37:6).

Family home evening is the Church's "weapon of mass construction." It builds

families. It is the time when families learn the gospel together—sing, play, and pray together. It might seem like a simple thing—one day each week, maybe just an hour—but the benefits from family home evening are great. Our families will become stronger and more unified. I testify of this. My family has grown from the blessings of family home evening. My children, now all moved away, still talk about the lessons we had, the songs we sang, the projects we accomplished, and the memories we made.

The influence from family home evening can continue throughout generations. Our children enjoy and learn from family home evening. They then grow up, make friends, and have families, and the teachings go on. This inspired program not only ties our immediate family together, but the love and memories can bind generations to come.

Family home evening is where parents can bear their most sweet, heartfelt, and personal testimonies to their children. It is where they listen to their children's own first attempts at expressing their feelings for the Savior and their gratitude for blessings. It is a time of trust and acceptance within the family, before they try to express themselves to the world. Children and parents pray for each other and over each others' goals and concerns. Fathers and mothers hold personal interviews with their children, sharing and learning of their lives, goals, and needs. Families plan and schedule together, turning confusion into cooperation and support.

Future missionaries are trained in family home evening. On a mission, it may be hard to go to a home where young elders and sisters don't know the people or what to expect, especially when the language and customs are new. It's a different environment, and missionaries are sometime out of their comfort zone. But if they have been consistently taught in their homes through family home evening, they have resources on which to rely. They know how to pray. They know how to organize and

give a lesson. They know how to lead music, how to fix a few treats, and even how to keep a younger, or older, boy or girl interested until the time is up. They have learned how to take turns answering questions and to listen to others with respect. And they understand the basic principles of the gospel as taught by their families. They have a head start in their confidence for a successful mission. From small things come that which is great (see Alma 37:6). That is the power of living with plainness.

The Lord gives us solutions to our problems and ways to accomplish our goals. He has shown us the way through His words and inspiration to our prophets. These ideas may be simple and plain and ones that the world may think foolish, but if we lack the obedience to try them out, we are the ones who lose out. Much like Naaman of old, we may not truly understand the power of simplicity.

As explained in 2 Kings, Naaman was captain of the armies of Syria, "a great man . . . , and honourable, . . . but he was a leper" (5:1). His wife had a Hebrew maid who suggested that he go to see the prophet to be healed from his affliction. He went first to the king of Israel and then to the home of Elisha, the prophet. He came with his riches—horses, chariots, gold, and silver—for he was a very wealthy man. Elisha didn't go out to meet Naaman, but rather sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean" (5:10). But Naaman was offended and left angry. How dare Elisha only send a messenger. Wasn't Naaman better than that? And why wash in the Jordan River when there were nicer, cleaner rivers than that in his homeland? Naaman laments, "Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper" (5:11). But Elisha did not. He chose simplicity. Naaman's servants went out to him to console and plea: "If the prophet had

bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?" (5:13). Naaman was humbled. "Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean" (5:14).

Are we sometimes like Naaman? Would we do anything if only President Hinckley would ask us personally or if we were called to some great position in the Church? Do we have a preconceived notion of how it should be? Do we expect the Lord or His prophet to come and do great things in our honor? Is that what it takes for us to obey or understand? Or do we follow the simple authority and instructions given by his messengers? President Hinckley has asked us to have family home evening, family prayer, and family scripture study. He probably has not come to any of our door to ask, but he has given his instructions to his messengers—the Apostles, stake presidents, bishops, and other leaders. The instructions are simple, but they still work. They are lessons of living with plainness.

Teaching with Plainness

Jesus taught gospel truths with simplicity. He used clear, understandable language for those He taught. His stories and parables came from examples in their own lives: He spoke of shepherds, fishermen, lamps, oil, rocks, water, salt, and bread. His purpose was to clarify, not to confuse. Our Savior was the master teacher. His direct, plain approach was effective. People needed to easily know of His gospel and His teachings, for His time was short.

Is it so different now? Time is of the essence, and there is an urgency in our fast-paced world to understand and apply true gospel principles in this life. As a teacher of any group, teaching with plainness is necessary "that they may learn" (2 Nephi 25:4).

Sometimes in our callings as teachers, we get caught up in the "attraction" of the lesson. I've actually taught lessons when I've had to make three trips to the car just to get all of my decorations and visual aids for the room. There was a time when my handouts were the main focus, and I spent hours and hours on them. They were wonderful! If you haven't done this as a teacher, you've probably seen it in a class. Women seem to do this more than men. We don't see many priesthood lessons full of pictures, statues, flowers, draped cloths, and elaborate table settings. I think women do it because we are so conscientious in our desire to do well, or maybe it's because we're worried that we won't be as good as the woman who taught before; either way, it really isn't necessary.

I remember a time when Sister Sheri Dew, then a counselor in the general Relief Society presidency, came to our region to train stake Relief Society presidencies. We were so excited to meet her. The stake in charge had beautiful flowers and table arrangements in the room. Sister Dew greeted us and commented on her beautiful surroundings. She noted how lovely the flowers were and thanked the sisters who attended to all of the decorations. Then she picked up the flower arrangement, put it off to the side, and said, "Now, let's get to work."

She continued to teach about the importance of having the Spirit and realizing our callings. I learned some valuable lessons that day. It wasn't so much what she said as what I saw in myself, and I changed my concept of how I taught. I challenged myself to never again teach without simplicity.

We need to remember for whom we are teaching. We are teaching for our Lord—not ourselves—and we are teaching for the salvation of others. Nephi explains,

We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know

to what source they may look for a remission of their sins. [2 Nephi 25:26]

Our purpose as teachers is simply to help bring others unto Christ.

We need to remember what we are to teach. We are commanded to teach the doctrine. In Doctrine and Covenants 88:77, we are given the words of the Lord: “And I give unto you a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom.” Part of teaching the doctrine is using proper Church teaching materials—the lesson manuals, scriptures, and words of the prophets. Keep it plain and simple. There is no need to complicate our lessons with outside resources or speculation. I love this quote by President Heber J. Grant, “Teach and live the first principles of the gospel, and let the mysteries of heaven wait until you get to heaven” (qtd. in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Heber J. Grant*, [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2002], 5).

We need to remember that only the Spirit can truly teach. We are only humble instruments by which the Spirit works. The Spirit is what touches the hearts and minds of those who listen and causes a change, not us. Nephi states, “When a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men” (2 Nephi 33:1). Our job is to not get in His way, to not distract, so He can do His work. Our job is to try with all our faith, humility, and prayer to have the Spirit for ourselves and for those we teach and to have an understanding of our subject matter. If we don’t have the Spirit, our teaching will not be successful. We are plainly told so in Doctrine and Covenants 42:14: “And the Spirit shall be given unto you by the prayer of faith; and if ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach.”

The gospel is plain, and it makes sense in its simplicity. We should not try to complicate it,

or “[look] beyond the mark.” Jacob says of the Jews:

They despised the words of plainness . . . and sought for things that they could not understand. Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his plainness from them, and delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand, because they desired it. [Jacob 4:14]

How I hope we appreciate the plainness of the gospel and teach it simply so that its understanding will never be taken away from us. May we always remember that our goal as teachers is plain and simple—to teach the doctrine for the Lord with the Spirit to the people so that they and their families may come unto Christ and return to live with our Heavenly Father.

Speaking with Plainness

Nephi sets the standard for plain speaking when he declares, “I glory in plainness, I glory in truth” (2 Nephi 33:6). The scriptures have always told us to be honest, truthful, direct, and clear, without pretense, deception, or hypocrisy (see 2 Nephi 31:13). In today’s world, where confusion and contradictions abound, it becomes even more important to speak truth in plain and simple terms, especially in our responsibilities to guide and direct our families. The results can bring us our greatest joys. As the Apostle John says, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (3 John 1:4).

As parents it is critical that we teach our children to expect and accept simple, honest truth. It starts with open communication in the home, the first training ground. Most of children’s social skills, life’s expectations, and reactions are started in the home. We taught our children early that they could broach any subject, say or ask anything, as long as it was

done in a respectful manner. As a family we have discussed just about every subject imaginable, family members giving their opinions and reasons openly, asking for ideas and solutions from each other. We don't always agree, but we listen and honor each other's right to one's own opinion. We don't always expect agreement—or even calm conversation—but we always expect honesty. It builds great confidence in individuals and unity for families if we'll just talk—simply, plainly—and keep talking. I know that when a child can come to ask any question to a parent and know that the answer will be honest and complete, he will come again. The comfort and trust level will grow for both.

We have special mantles as mothers and fathers of our children. We cannot give that mantle to anyone else. We should not expect someone else—a teacher, a youth leader, a bishop—to teach our children what we should be teaching. We cannot give up the responsibility. We should not be afraid to be parents.

Part of our responsibility is to teach our families about life, the reality of it all. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” states:

Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, to teach them to love and serve one another, to observe the commandments of God and to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live. Husbands and wives—mothers and fathers—will be held accountable before God for the discharge of these obligations. [Ensign, November 1995, 102]

We must teach our families about consequences. That is what our Heavenly Father, the perfect parent, does with us. We must teach them about real life in plain and simple speaking so they can succeed in real life. We like to encourage and tell of all the blessings of life, but we must not neglect the sorrows and hardships as well. We must tell it

like it is. How do we know how and what to say? We need to pray for guidance. We need to ask the Spirit to be with us as we speak and counsel our children. Jacob explains:

The Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be; wherefore, these things are manifested unto us plainly, for the salvation of our souls. [Jacob 4:13]

Part of our responsibility as parents is to guide, direct, and warn if necessary. We need sometimes to ask the questions we don't want to ask, use the words we don't want to use, find out some things we may not want to know. Some topics must be covered as directly as their consequences are lethal—subjects such as modesty, drugs, pornography, and immorality. We must not be too shy to ask. We will probably be more shocked and embarrassed than our children, but we must have the courage to discuss. We cannot hide our heads and say that something can never happen to us or to ours. It can and it does. If we are to be leading, guiding parents, we cannot be the last to know.

Usually television, movies, and other media do not present reality. Their values don't reflect real-life consequences. They show that sexual activity before marriage is expected. In real life it's called expecting. They show only one side of life and forget to show the sorrows that many of these choices can bring. Is it any wonder that life's decisions have become so difficult for our children? There is much confusion in the world, and almost every choice is laid out before them. We can be catalysts to help our children learn discernment. Through the power of open, honest, plain speaking, we can give them the trust and confidence to know where to go for truth. We can teach them the power of the simple truths of the gospel. By meaning what we say and saying what we mean, we teach what truth is.

Many people say, “I could never speak that directly. I’m afraid I’d offend.” Nephi instructs us concerning offenses when he speaks to his brothers: “Wherefore, the guilty taketh the truth to be hard, for it cutteth them to the very center” (1 Nephi 16:2). The offense is usually not meant by the speaker but taken only because it “cutteth . . . to the very center.” Why are we so afraid of speaking truth? Is being politically correct so important that we miss opportunities to warn, testify, change, or lift? We do always need to examine our motives when speaking plainly. We must never speak in anger or for revenge. Our purpose cannot be to hurt or gain power; if it is, it is not from the Spirit. If children are raised with plain speaking and expect truth, they have a much easier time accepting it without offense.

Honest speaking is as important in compliments as it is in questions and answers. There is great power in a true compliment. It can encourage and lift to great heights; but we all know the difference between a deserved compliment and one given only out of politeness. Find things that are truly good in people and tell them—plain and simple. We shouldn’t wait until people die before expressing how much we love them or how much they’ve done for us. Eulogies are wasted on the dead. Let’s lift the living! Think of the building we could do with more plainness—and our compliments will be believed because we are honest.

Plain speaking is one of the most valuable tools of sharing truth. Think of how missionaries challenge people to change their lives by obeying the Word of Wisdom, reading the Book of Mormon, praying, repenting, being baptized. It works because the challenge is simple, honest, and pure, and it is given for the loving benefit of others. It comes from the Spirit, as an expression of true charity. A testimony is the same. “It is a simple, direct declaration of belief. . . . Testimonies are often most powerful when they are short, concise, and direct” (*Teaching, No Greater Call: A Resource Guide for Gospel Teaching* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999], 43).

I have a testimony of simplicity, of the power of plainness in living, teaching, and speaking. I believe in honesty and truth. I know it is true that Heavenly Father lives and loves us and that we are His beloved sons and daughters. I know Jesus Christ is His Son and our Savior, who loved us and the plan of salvation so much that He atoned for our sins, opened the doors of resurrection, and gave us the possibility of exaltation. I know Joseph Smith restored this church, the Church of Jesus Christ, upon the earth in the latter days. I know President Hinckley is a prophet today, one who leads with truth. I am grateful for plainness, that I may learn. And I am grateful for this gospel—plain and simple. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.