

# *The Worth of Souls Is Great*

KRISTIN L. MATTHEWS

Good morning, friends. A few months ago I had the opportunity to travel to Italy for the first time. While there I saw art created by the great masters: Michelangelo, Botticelli, Fra Angelico, and many others. In Milan I was able to see the famed *The Last Supper* of Leonardo da Vinci. This mural is in the refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, and to see it one must purchase tickets ahead of time and wait for one's fifteen minutes with the painting. When my time drew near, I was corralled with twenty-four others into a waiting area, guided through two air-locked chambers, and finally allowed in front of the painting for fifteen minutes of communion.

As I sat there I contemplated the painting and why it is considered priceless—the value of which is beyond measure. Is it because the painting is old, created in the fifteenth century? Is it because of where it is located—in Milan? Is it because access is limited—few people can see it, so it is more valuable than paintings just anyone can see? Is it because it has been threatened in the past—like when Napoleon used the convent as an armory, a prison, and a stable or when it was partially destroyed by bombs during World War II? Is it because it was painted in an unconven-

tional style—on a dry wall versus in the wet plaster—making it more fragile and rare? Is it because of who painted it—the great master da Vinci? Is it because of its subject?

These questions and others I chewed on while sitting and looking at this painting. I'd like to say that I came up with profound answers that shook me to my core, but instead I came up with more questions. How do we measure value? What makes something—and, more important, someone—of worth?

## **Defining Value**

As a professor of literature and culture, it is my job to look at systems of meaning and value, language being the first and foremost. If we go to the *Oxford English Dictionary*—the fifth standard work for all English majors—excerpts from the entry for the word *value* (n) read:

- *worth or quality as measured by a standard of equivalence*
- *a standard of estimation or exchange*

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- [something] *worth having*
- *material or monetary worth of something*
- *an appraisalment*
- *relative rank or importance*
- *worth based on esteem*
- *estimation [based on] real or supposed desirability or utility [later extended] to an individual or group*
- *opinion of or liking for a person or thing*
- *worth or worthiness . . . in respect of rank*<sup>1</sup>

According to these definitions, a thing's value is contingent on ideas of estimation, desirability, likeability, and worthiness. It is at the center of the word *evaluate*—to analyze—yet often we do not ask the questions, Who determines the system of value by which we are considering, classifying, and ranking people or things? Who determines the mechanism of evaluation and the indices of what is evaluated? Who sets the “standard of equivalence” that says some things have greater worth than others?

As human beings, one of the things that we do to understand our world is to create systems of meaning that help us organize the sensations, experiences, and objects we encounter. I remember a time when I was reading with my oldest nephew, Connor, as he was learning different categories of animals—how a dog is not a cow and a cow is not a zebra. What the animal looked like, how it sounded, and what it ate all factored in as he learned how to identify these different species. Similarly, we have created categories such as nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, religious affiliation, political party, marital status, and so on to organize and make sense of humankind's diversity. However, too often we use these seemingly descriptive systems to determine the worth of others. These human-made hierarchies of value can cause division, contention, and skewed understandings of self-worth.

Conversely, God's system of valuing us promotes connection, compassion, and love.

We are His children. He loves us unconditionally, eternally, and unchangingly. Our worth is infinite because we are His daughters and sons. No one spirit is more valuable than the other. So why, then, do we fall short of loving and “measuring right” God's children? We read in Doctrine and Covenants 18:10 that “the worth of souls is great in the sight of God,” but do we really believe that, or do we bookmark that scripture in our minds as only for missionary purposes? Today I'd like to reflect upon how we might better align how we value others with how the Lord values His children so that we might be true disciples of Christ.

### What Are You Worth?

“So what are you worth?” This is a question I overheard as I may or may not have been eavesdropping on a recent flight. (In my defense, it is hard not to hear everything going on around you on a plane.) In response to the question, the petitioned gentleman cited portfolio figures, property holdings, and his net financial wealth. My first thought was, “Holy cow! I hope nobody measures my worth by what's in my savings account; otherwise I'm in trouble.” Then I sat and thought more about how externalities like wealth are used to ascribe value to individuals. I was reminded of Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence*. In this text Wharton satirizes the intricate set of codes that the very wealthy used to dictate behavior and measure worth in Gilded Age New York. People who abided by these strict codes were accepted into high society as a valued member. Those who did not or could not abide by these codes were dismissed as vulgar, low class, and—the worst of all designations—“unpleasant.”

When I teach this novel my students have no trouble laughing at these characters and their shallowness. But we as early twenty-first-century folk too have codes that separate the “hots” from the “nots” (to quote a Facebook page that has been in the local news recently).

As a class we started to identify various markers or codes that could be used to rank others and came up with a list: what people wear, what cell phone they have, what laptop they use, what car they drive, what bands they listen to, what size their jeans are, what status their relationship is in, what apartment complex they live in, what films they watch, what facial hair they grow, and so on. My students found that these things that seemingly describe actually *prescribe* certain behaviors and beliefs deemed important to acceptance and worth.

Oftentimes we are unaware that we are ascribing worth to people in ways that contradict or challenge our professed beliefs as Christians. Wealth, physical appearance, education, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religious affiliation, and political party are just some categories that can be used to lift some folks up and bring others down. Whether we like to admit it or not, it is human to rank and ascribe value to others, and more often than not we ascribe higher value to people who are like us than to those who are different. It is now cliché to say this, but we fear what we don't know, so difference is made suspect or "bad," whereas familiarity breeds comfort, so sameness becomes more valuable. In addition, fear of coming up short or fear of not being enough often propels these negative behaviors. Because we fear we are somehow less, we seek to elevate ourselves above others to convince ourselves that we are valuable.

### **False Systems of Value**

Where do these systems that evaluate worth come from? These systems are neither eternal nor transcendent but are human creations based on place and time that, more often than not, benefit those in positions of power who have created these systems.

For example, pseudoscientific ideas of racial superiority elevating Anglo-Saxons above all others were perpetuated for centuries in

order to justify devaluing and dehumanizing persons of color so that their land might be seized and their bodies be used as slaves or subjects. Until recently, social narratives said that humans in possession of two X chromosomes were intellectually inferior, predisposed to emotional irrationality, and incapable of governing others—let alone governing themselves. This valuation barred women from holding property, gaining an education, voting in elections, and participating in the public sphere.

These human systems by which human beings have been evaluated, categorized, and ranked have changed with time and place. Obviously these systems that elevate some and denigrate others are destructive and have led to wars, enslavement, and discrimination—violence of a social and global scale.

These false systems of value also have a negative impact on a smaller scale—on the individual and his or her sense of self-worth and place in the community. Being told that you are less, that you'll never fit in or add up, or that you'll be accepted only when you change who you are is destructive emotionally, spiritually, and, at times, physically.

One system of valuation that has negative consequences for feelings of individual worth is beauty. Human beings go to great lengths to achieve some ideal beauty—extreme workouts, plastic surgery, eating disorders, elaborate makeup rituals, extensive hair and nail treatments, and compulsive shopping. All of these behaviors stem from the desire to be beautiful because we are taught to believe that beautiful people are more valuable than others.

Here in Utah we are not immune to this trend. In November 2007 *Forbes* magazine named Salt Lake City the vainest city in America because it had more plastic surgeons and used more beauty products per capita than any other large city in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Drive down I-15 and you'll see sign after sign offering to fix how you look to make a better

you. Scroll through a Facebook feed or watch one commercial break during prime-time television viewing hours and you'll see several examples in which bodies are objectified, shamed, and tied to one's individual worth. If we are prisoners in the wasteland that is reality TV, we are subjected to scores of plastic surgery shows, makeover shows, "dating" shows, and dangerous weight-loss competitions inundating us with the message that one can never be beautiful enough and that happiness is predicated upon one's skin, teeth, hair, weight, shape, and wardrobe. We read in 1 Samuel 16:7 that "man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart"—and our modern culture's obsession with beauty indeed confirms that.

This obsession is not without its costs. In a general conference talk Elder Jeffrey R. Holland remarked on this false system of value and its destructive nature, pleading with women young and old:

*Please be more accepting of yourselves, including your body shape and style, with a little less longing to look like someone else. We are all different. . . . If you are obsessing over being a size 2, you won't be very surprised when your daughter or the Mia Maid in your class does the same and makes herself physically ill trying to accomplish it. . . .*

*. . . It is spiritually destructive, and it accounts for much of the unhappiness women, including young women, face in the modern world. And if adults are preoccupied with appearance—tucking and nipping and implanting and remodeling everything that can be remodeled—those pressures and anxieties will certainly seep through to children. At some point the problem becomes what the Book of Mormon called "vain imaginations."<sup>3</sup>*

As Elder Holland said, this preoccupation with appearance and this socially constructed idea of beauty as that by which we find worth or value is physically and spiritually destructive—and it isn't just limited to women. Men

too have to negotiate pressures of appearance, and eating disorders, exercise bulimia, and psychological troubles associated with achieving beauty are on the rise among men.

Are beautiful people better people? Does God love them more? I am sure we would all respond with a resounding no; however, do you say no when you look in the mirror and criticize yourself or when you criticize others for their appearance? Do we believe what we say? Remember: ideal beauty is a construction of this world. We can point to the usual suspects for this false system of value—the fashion industry, advertising, television, and so on. And yes, we are bombarded with images that say, "This is beautiful. If you are this, you will be popular, you will be important, you will be datable, you will be marriageable, you will be worth loving." While we know this to be false, the rates of "tucking and nipping and implanting and remodeling," as Elder Holland said, and the rates of eating disorders and depression among college students on this campus and others tell us that this is very real.

### Loving Thy Neighbor

One of my favorite works of literature is Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*. This play examines the ways in which socially constructed categories of worth can grind down individuals and offers a corrective. The Younger family is poor and black, living in Southside Chicago after World War II. The degradations of racist housing and hiring practices have worn them out, eating away at familial relationships and draining each individual of hope.

At the beginning of the third act the Younger family is reeling from the news that Walter Lee Younger's actions have lost the small inheritance that could have helped them better their situation. His sister, Beneatha, turns against him, saying he is no longer a man but "a toothless rat."

Her mother corrects her, reminding her that she taught her to love him, to which Beneatha

replies, “Love him? There is nothing left to love.” Indeed, the oppressive weight of racism has told the Youngers that they are worth nothing so many times that they are starting to believe it.

Yet Mama rightly says in this memorable speech:

*There is always something left to love. . . . Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most? When they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain't through learning—because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in hisself 'cause the world done whipped him so! When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.<sup>4</sup>*

Mama reminds Beneatha that all individuals are of worth, that there is always something to love, and that we must rethink how we measure each other. Ultimately she argues that correct measurement is not contingent on external factors but instead is based upon one's immutable worth as a human being. And for Mama, a practicing Christian, there's more: worth cannot be diminished and there is always something to love because all are children of God.

Heavenly Father knew that we would have trouble with this. Indeed, the scriptures are full of commands to resist the human impulse to rank people and instead to see them as God does. For example, Leviticus contains several injunctions to the Israelites to accept and love all those among them. We read:

*And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him.*

*But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. [Leviticus 19:33–34]*

God commanded the Israelites to look past human-made constructions of nationality or religious practice and to see and love a “stranger” as “one born among you.” He commanded that we not vex others we perceive as different. He asked that we recognize that us/them divisions are artificial because *all* are God's children. He also reminded the Israelites that they too were strangers and that we *all* are strangers at one point or another in our lives. If God did and could show mercy to them—His children—then so should they to others.

Before that, God commanded the Israelites to “love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:18). There are no caveats here—no “love thy neighbor unless he is X, Y, or Z”—but a command for total inclusion. The final statement “I am the Lord” underscores who is speaking and distinguishes the divine commandment to love inclusively from the human tendency to distinguish, evaluate, discriminate, and tolerate.

### Brothers and Sisters in God

One of my least favorite words is *tolerate* because its popular usage assigns a superiority to the speaker and an inferiority to the object of their speech. You tolerate somebody else's person, beliefs, or actions, which implies that your own person, beliefs, or actions are superior. Yet this is not the Lord's way, and our leaders have pointed this out to us. In a CES devotional Elder Dallin H. Oaks defined tolerance “as a friendly and fair attitude toward unfamiliar opinions and practices or toward the persons who hold or practice them.”<sup>5</sup> Note the words *friendly* and *fair* in this definition. Elder Oaks also asked us “to be more thoughtful about the nature of tolerance,” stressing that “all . . . are brothers and sisters under God” and, as such, deserve respect.<sup>6</sup>

*Mutual respect* is the term that Elder Russell M. Nelson used in a general conference talk on tolerance, citing a recent statement by the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles that read:

“We sincerely believe that as we acknowledge one another with consideration and compassion we will discover that we can all peacefully coexist despite our deepest differences.”<sup>7</sup> “Consideration and compassion”—not condescension—are the attributes our leaders invite us to magnify.

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf said in his address “You Are My Hands”:

*When I think of the Savior, I often picture Him with hands outstretched, reaching out to comfort, heal, bless, and love. And He always talked with, never down to, people. He loved the humble and meek and walked among them, ministering to them and offering hope and salvation.*

*That is what He did during His mortal life; it is what He would be doing if He were living among us today; and it is what we should be doing as His disciples and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.*<sup>8</sup>

The connotation of *tolerate* that suggests judgment, condescension, and distaste does not work with the Lord’s example of talking *with* versus down to people and His injunction to love all liberally, withholding nothing. As He and our leaders have taught, compassion, respect, fairness, friendliness, and thoughtfulness mark how we should look upon difference of opinion, beliefs, and position in life, for, as Elder Oaks said, all are brothers and sisters in God.

Christ Himself refused to recognize distinctions of class, nationality, race, gender, politics, or faith among people but instead saw each individual as a child of God worthy of His time, service, teachings, and love. When a diseased woman who was shunned by all others approached Him for help and took hold of His garment, He neither condemned nor dismissed her but blessed her (see Luke 8:43–48). When a fallen woman approached Him to wash His feet, Christ didn’t chastise her but instead accepted her act of charity (see Luke

7:37–38). When the Pharisees criticized Him for dining with a publican—a man who represented the wrong profession, the wrong politics, and an alien occupying nation—Christ rebuked them saying that His word and His love was for all (see Mark 2:15–17; Luke 15:1–2). Finally, when Jesus saw the Samaritan woman at the well He did not shun her as taboo would demand for being a woman and a Samaritan but spoke to her, taught her, and loved her (see John 4:5–42).

Likewise, Christ’s parables teach that we need to see beyond human-created divisions that classify and evaluate people in order to see them for who and what they are: children of God. The good Samaritan in Luke 10 is a perfect example of this. We all know the story: Before the Samaritan came along, a priest and a Levite passed the injured man by. Along came a Samaritan. This alleged enemy of Israel could have said, “Oh, this guy is a foreigner,” “This guy is my enemy,” “This guy is from another church,” or “Somebody else should take care of him because he is not my problem nor worth my time.” Instead of seeing these differences and divisions, the Samaritan saw this man as a human being of worth and acted on that vision. It was this man from the outside—this stranger—who had compassion on the robbed man, binding up his wounds and providing for his shelter and further care.

Using this parable Christ taught that we need to love and care for all people—not just those like us—because all are of worth to Him. Furthermore, since He is sharing this lesson with His disciples, He is teaching that a measure of our discipleship to Him is how we treat all others. Do we pass judgment on and pass over others? Or do we stop to aid and minister unto them?

### **Becoming True Disciples of Christ**

This reminds me of something the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir wrote: “One’s life has value so long as one attributes value to

the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, [and] compassion.”<sup>9</sup> Now, I would argue that all lives have value but that our value as disciples of Christ depends upon how we attribute value to the lives of others. If we devalue, demean, denigrate, or dismiss others, we diminish our discipleship and destroy that which makes us human: compassion. But when we value others, we not only demonstrate the best that humanity is but we also magnify our discipleship.

Time and time again in the scriptures prophets, apostles, and the Lord Himself call us to love all people. Here are a few examples. As read earlier, Leviticus 19:18 tells us to “love thy neighbour as thyself”—a command reiterated in Matthew 19:19. In the gospel of John we read the words that have become a beloved hymn in the Latter-day Saint community:

*A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.*

*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. [John 13:34–35; see “Love One Another,” Hymns, 2002, 308]*

The direct occasion for this command is Christ counseling His disciples and preparing them for the proselytizing work they are to do. Yet this command also extends to us, His disciples in the latter days. If we believe in Him we must extend love one to another—and not just to those within the body of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but to all of His children on this earth. If we believe in Him we will do as Nephi asked: we will “press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men [and women]” (2 Nephi 31:20; emphasis added). If we believe in Him, we will do as the people of King Benjamin did and “give thanks to the Lord their God [and] rejoice and be filled with love towards God and all men [and women]” (Mosiah 2:4; emphasis added).

The scriptures repeatedly tell us that discipleship means loving one another. Again, there is no qualification here: the scriptures do not say, “Love God and all men and women, except for those who are or do X.” No, we are commanded to love *all* men and women if we are to be counted among Christ’s disciples.

In *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Christian reformer John Calvin spoke of true discipleship and its requirement to recognize all humans as children of God worthy of love. Calvin took on various arguments propping up false systems of valuation, disarming them with the gospel of love. He wrote:

*Say he is a stranger. The Lord has given him a mark which ought to be familiar to you: for which reason he forbids you to despise your own flesh (Gal. vi. 10). Say he is mean and of no consideration. The Lord points him out as one whom he has distinguished by the lustre of his own image (Isaiah lviii. 7). Say that you are bound to him by no ties of duty. The Lord has substituted him as it were into his own place, that in him you may recognise the many great obligations under which the Lord has laid you to himself. Say that he is unworthy of your least exertion on his account; but the image of God, by which he is recommended to you, is worthy of yourself and all your exertions. But if he not only merits no good, but has provoked you by injury and mischief, still this is no good reason why you should not embrace him in love, and visit him with offices of love.<sup>10</sup>*

What Calvin repeats over and over is that the image and grace of God are found in all those whom we would dismiss or denigrate. He also stresses that we are all connected and none is better than another. And because all humans are children of God, all deserve our affection and “offices of love.” Or, to come back to President Uchtdorf’s talk, because all have God’s image engraved upon their countenances and Christ’s sacrifice inscribed upon their souls, all are called to be His hands—to

serve, to embrace, to welcome, to fellowship, to comfort, and to lift up others. We read in Moroni 8:16 that “perfect love casteth out all fear.” Love of God and our fellow men and women dispels our fear of difference and of not measuring up. It sanctifies us, giving us even greater capacity to love.

This is the message of my favorite book of scripture, 1 John. In this epistle the author maps out the nature of God’s love and the love that is true discipleship:

*Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.*

*He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.*

*In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.*

*Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

*Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. . . .*

*. . . God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. . . .*

*We love him, because he first loved us.*

*If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?*

*And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also. [1 John 4:7–11, 16, 19–21]*

God loves us because we are His children and we are of infinite worth. Because He loves us and has blessed us with His grace, we are commanded to see all others as children of God and to love them—to love our brothers and sisters. This epistle calls us out for our potential hypocrisy: if we say we love God but then demean others, we do not really love God because such love would banish ill will

from our hearts. As we read in John, “For 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). “God so loved the world”—not parts of the world or certain people living in this world, but the whole world—that he gave us His Son, which was a huge sacrifice on His part. And in return He asks that we sacrifice our petty divisions, toxic sectarianism, and false hierarchies of value to recognize the worth of each human being and child of God.

The *why* of loving is clear—the *how* is sometimes less so. Loving all of God’s children requires humility and a desire to do so. It means that we have to shift how we look at others so that we no longer see people as demographics but as children of God. This does not come easily or right away but requires persistence and hard work. Sometimes we may fail, but if we do we must forgive ourselves and try again as we strive to become better disciples.

### Your Infinite Value

So what are you worth? I hope you know that you are above and beyond those false measures of worth that we humans have created. You have an infinite value that has nothing to do with what your portfolio contains, what size you wear, what party you vote, what color your skin is, what your gender is, and so on. Why? First, because you are a human being, and all human beings have value. Second, because you are a child of heavenly parents who love you and see you for the valuable person you are.

It is my testimony that God is love, that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of love, and that true discipleship requires sharing that love with all people. It is my hope that we will be able to recognize and reject those false systems of value that demean and divide and instead embrace the love that is true discipleship. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.



**Notes**

1. From the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2013, online), s.v. “value.”

2. See Rebecca Ruiz, “America’s Vainest Cities,” *Forbes*, 29 November 2007, [forbes.com/2007/11/29/plastic-health-surgery-forbeslife-cx\\_rr\\_1129health.html](http://forbes.com/2007/11/29/plastic-health-surgery-forbeslife-cx_rr_1129health.html).

3. Jeffrey R. Holland, “To Young Women,” *Ensign*, November 2005, 29–30.

4. Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 144–45; emphasis in original.

5. Dallin H. Oaks, “Truth and Tolerance,” CES devotional address, 11 September 2011; see also “Balancing Truth and Tolerance,” *Ensign*, February 2013, 26.

6. Oaks, “Truth and Tolerance.”

7. Statement of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, 18 October 1992, as quoted in the *Church News*, 24 October 1992, 4; quoted in Russell M. Nelson, “Teach Us Tolerance and Love,” *Ensign*, May 1994, 71.

8. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “You Are My Hands,” *Ensign*, May 2010, 68; emphasis in original.

9. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O’Brian (New York: Putnam, 1972), 541.

10. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 11–12.