

## “Become as a Little Child”

JAMES M. PARAMORE

I would first like to tell you a little story about Elder LeGrand Richards. I choose him as my subject because he represents the qualities that I want to talk about tonight. Brother Richards was at a conference about a year ago, when he was in his ninety-fifth year. At the conference at which he reorganized a stake, he sat on the stand, and the choir sang a beautiful rendition, and he thought they were so outstanding that he turned around to the choir leader and said, “I’ll bet you could sing ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic,’ couldn’t you?”

The choir leader said, “Yes, I think we could.”

He said, “Good. I’d liked to hear it sung at the end of this conference today.”

In and of itself, that doesn’t seem like a very unusual thing, but unbeknown to Brother Richards, sitting halfway back in the audience was a man who had been inactive and who decided that he’d go to conference, and if the choir sang “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” he would know that it was a signal from heaven that he was supposed to be active again.

A most unusual series of events—except that isn’t where it ends. Because he was there and made the decision to become active again, when they reorganized his ward bishopric a week later, he was called to be a counselor in

that bishopric. He already had his answer, and he knew what he would need to do. Then he recounted the story—this spiritual little story out of one of the many pages of Latter-day Saint stories throughout the world in which the Spirit of our Father in Heaven guides us.

I’d like to talk tonight about the subject of “Becoming as a Little Child” because I’m concerned for a number of reasons. *First*, there is a subtle attempt in the world to no longer want children. In the world in general, the model is no longer a family, but rather two young people—both working—who by an enlarged income can afford the life-style that in the past only the rich could enjoy. Sometimes, this couple, in their finely tailored suits or on the beaches of the world with their lean, tanned bodies, never want to be encumbered by even one child. Children interfere with their carefree life-style. For many, childrearing may be one of the greatest casualties of modern times. In these cases, they place their own pursuits, their own interests, first. There is no time for children. This, of course, is not the norm for

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Latter-day Saints, but is rampant in the world and not only denies the bodies for the spiritual children of our Father in Heaven, but also denies these people some of the learning and inspiration of a loving Father in Heaven essential to exaltation.

*Second*, the purpose of marriage is to provide bodies for the spirit children of our Father in Heaven, and also to help us learn how to love, sacrifice, obey, and serve one another. There are thousands of learning experiences in the family, each contributing to the other. It is the greatest learning factory in this world to overcome selfishness, and it is designed by our Father in Heaven to be of an eternal nature and importance. Children have not lost their place in God's society, but are essential to it, and the lessons we learn from them are absolutely imperative. Some of these lessons, gifts, and qualities I'd like to talk to you about tonight.

*Third*, one of the greatest needs we have, my young friends, is to retain and develop the innate qualities of little children, for they are alive in Christ. As students at this great university, we learn many things that will bless our lives and provide us professional opportunities and many new spiritual insights. But let us not forget some innate qualities that will permit us a fullness and quality of life that will eventually lead to eternal life.

Not too long ago, I came across the following little poem that will introduce what I'd like to say about children.

*My dad gave me a one-dollar bill  
'Cause I'm his smartest son,  
And I swapped it for two shiny quarters  
'Cause two is more than one!*

*And then I took the quarters  
And traded them to Lou  
For three dimes—I guess he don't know  
That three is more than two!*

*Just then, along came old blind Bates  
And just 'cause he can't see,  
He gave me four nickels for my three dimes  
And four is more than three!*

*And I took the nickels to Hyrum Coombs  
Down at the feed store,  
And the fool gave me five pennies for them,  
And five is more than four!*

*And then I went and showed my Dad  
And he got red in the cheeks,  
And closed his eyes and shook his head—  
Too proud of me to speak!  
—Author unknown*

It is obvious from this little story that children don't know everything. But, my young friends, there are many things that they know instinctively that are great gifts, and if not understood and pursued energetically can limit the power, beauty, quality, and destiny of our lives.

Isn't it interesting that the Savior would make the following statement: "And again I say unto you, ye must . . . become as a little child, or ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God" (3 Nephi 11:38)? Over the years I have learned some things from children that I would like to share with you today, which to my mind help me to realize why the Savior said what he did.

### **The Power to Believe**

First of all, children are endowed with a great power to believe. They believe that they can do anything. Dad can do anything; the Lord can do anything. My youngest son, a few years ago, went out each day believing he could catch a hundred—maybe even a thousand—butterflies, and was prepared with enough bottles to prove it. You suggest something, and they believe it can happen. Frankly, the thought never enters their minds that it couldn't be done. That power to believe is

sorely needed in the world today by everyone—every father, mother, member, bishop, missionary—if we are to catch the vision of the Lord and the prophet as he continually encourages us to higher ground.

A few years ago, quite miraculously, I attended a stake conference in western Washington. I had secretly prayed I could be assigned there, but one of the Twelve was assigned. Then the member of the Twelve's assignment was changed a few days before the conference, and my assignment was changed from another stake to this particular one. When I arrived and had an interview with the stake president, I knew we needed to do something to carry out the mandate on missionary work given by the Prophet. We all worked diligently together throughout the two-day conference, making some suggestions to improve the involvement of the members in the work.

In the concluding session, I did something I had never done before in a conference. I blessed the people that if they would follow the suggestions given, believing without doubting, a special blessing from the Lord would come upon them as a stake, and many would join the Church. Incidentally, the stake president and I felt the members should immediately make a list from their close circle of friends, as President Spencer W. Kimball had counseled. You remember, he said that the Lord has placed some of those people in our circle because we are supposed to bring them into the Church. The thirty-four-year-old stake president, who had been in the Church eight years, led out; and because of his childlike faith in God and his servants, he commenced immediately. By the middle of the next week he telephoned to report that he and his wife and small children had prepared a list of two hundred names of people they felt would be receptive to the gospel. One week later he wrote me the following letter.

*We are hearing stories daily of missionary experiences. I've made approximately two contacts and have my next-door neighbors playing on the ward basketball team, and we've had them over for family home evening. Also, I believe we have another lady acquaintance ready to hear the missionaries. Our children have been taking friends to Primary, and Julie is working on a widow to get her to Relief Society.*

*Oh, I almost forgot, we held a special meeting for the brethren and their spouses and the Relief Society presidencies and their spouses to discuss and motivate them about missionary work. We challenged them to come to the meeting as you did me, with names of nonmember families they are going to work with, and more than one thousand names were brought to that meeting. The blessing that fell upon our stake has yielded the spirit and the faith and the action that we all can feel.*

He continues in his letter:

*One of the elders quorum presidents went home from the meeting pondering how to approach a neighbor he didn't even know. The next day, the president was working in his yard when the neighbor came over and asked, "Brian, when is your family going to start sharing the gospel with us, start fellowshipping us?" This, of course, surprised the quorum president very much, but after a long talk with the neighbor he discovered that this man had been raised in southern Idaho around LDS people and had great respect for them. We are convinced that the blessing which was pronounced upon our stake prompted this man to come forward and express his desires. The Lord really has blessed us because we believed.*

Another example: In a ward in Salt Lake City, where we live, a few years ago a bishop made a resolute, absolute commitment to himself that he was going to try to have every young person in his ward go on a mission, and so he began the painstaking effort that that would take. Two years of contact and

interviews and special experiences, of believing they could be touched by the Lord, found over thirty missionaries serving from that ward at the same time. Many had been reactivated from total inactivity and had repented and put their lives in order. Among them was a couple that had been excommunicated a couple of years earlier. They repented, changed their lives, and went on a mission—along with a formerly inactive son.

Also, let me tell you about a young man—I apologize that I do not have his name—whom I read about several years ago in the U.S. Army *Stars and Stripes* newspaper who cleared the two-meter mark in high jump (that’s about the height of Devin Durrant). He believed he could do it and set about the arduous task and practiced and worked at it until one day, after thousands of attempts, he finally made it, his goal forever, and what made it even more impressive was the fact that he had only one leg.

Yes, belief—without doubting—as the Prophet Joseph Smith learned when he was fourteen, is mandatory. See how uncomplicated it is just to believe—to believe on his words. The Savior said, “If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth” (Mark 9:23).

### **The Power of Implicit Faith**

Another thing I learned from children is that they have implicit faith—in the principles of the gospel, in parents, leaders, people in general. When they are young and pure, they don’t have to have all the answers. They have faith that Mom and Dad are right, and that they would never lead them astray. What a heavy burden that is on us—to build faith that will not be destroyed by bad habits and practices.

I think of a story about President David O. McKay, ninth president of the Church, when he was a young lad. He was taught by his father to pray when confronted with a

problem. When he was eight years of age, he received a new pocketknife on his birthday, and he recounts the experience of that day by telling how he got on his horse and rode out into the valley, made a fire, ate his lunch, and then got ready to return home.

As he began riding home, he remembered he had forgotten his new pocketknife, and so he quickly turned around and raced back to the same spot and searched in vain for his knife. He then remembered his father’s teaching, and because of the counsel of his father and his faith in him, he got on his knees and began to talk simply and earnestly to the Lord. In the midst of his prayer, he saw a vision come into his mind—a picture as clear as any TV picture—and there, as a picture in his mind, he saw his knife under a clump of weeds. He got up on his feet, looked around, walked directly to the scene he had just witnessed in his mind, and found his knife exactly as it had been revealed.

What a powerful lesson on faith in one’s father and faith in the Lord this young president-to-be learned that day. This kind of faith leads to spiritual and other accomplishments. Can you see that, because of this faith, children—young people—are humble and teachable, and as such become benefactors of truth and happiness? One of the greatest armies of faith ever upon this earth is the 26,000 young missionaries who have total faith in God, his principles, and his leaders.

### **The Power of Obedience**

Another lesson taught me over and over again is that children are intrinsically obedient. As children develop, they obey without a thousand reasons. For example, it is fun and right for them to pay their tithes. I noticed a little girl a while back with a tithing envelope in her hand, looking all through the chapel to find the bishop.

How powerfully this lesson was taught once in France when a family got into their car

to go see the grandparents. While en route they saw the grandmother coming in another direction and pulled the car over to stop and get her attention. As soon as the car stopped, a small boy jumped out of the backseat and began to run across the busy highway to see his grandmother. The father, seeing his son in danger, just yelled, “Stop,” as the boy reached the center of the road. There was no time to give instructions or reasons, just direction. The boy, hearing his father’s voice, stopped and froze there until rescued. How profound it really is to be like a child and be obedient!

One of the most classic of all the stories of simple and complete obedience, without having reasons, is that of Abraham and Isaac. Listen to this great experience in obedience.

*And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.*

*And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.*

*And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.*

*Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.*

*And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.*

*And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.*

*And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*

*And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.*

*And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.*

*And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.*

*And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.*

*And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou has not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. [Genesis 22:1–12]*

How many times might we have had greater blessings if we had been totally and immediately obedient as was Abraham on that most difficult occasion. A child teaches us, over and over again, this principle, and only because he is led in his heart to do it—no reasons, no lengthy dialogue or explanations—just simple obedience. Oh, the blessings that await those who are obedient, now and forever! Yes, students, to become learned is good, if you do not forget wisdom and obedience to higher laws which come from heaven. As the scriptures say, “To be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:29).

### **The Power of Love**

Another thing I have learned is that little children love with a perfect love, which has no bounds. There is no judgment or second guessing or holding back. These qualities seem almost innate. I noticed some time ago that a young son and his friend had somehow had bad words, and were really angry, but the real lesson came just minutes later when all offenses and discord were forgotten—never, never to be remembered again. They just followed an instinctive pattern that sometimes,

when we are older and wiser and more mature, we fail to remember.

The world so needs the love and concern for others that children have, whose love springs forth naturally and completely. I spent a few minutes a few weeks ago in a little French town called Pont-à-Mousson, organizing a new stake in that area, and there was a little French girl there, the small daughter of one of the leaders. She was a pure, beautiful young child who had total trust and love and confidence in everyone around her, including me. There were no inhibitions to her warmth, her faith in others, and her desire to let us feel her love for the Lord, her parents, the members, her leaders, and me, a total stranger. She was so delightful I wanted to bring her home. Children love with an almost perfect love, and if we can capture that in our lives forever, how blessed we would be, and how enriched our world would be.

### **The Power of Service**

Another important point I've learned from children—they serve anxiously. Before little children get onto our ways, they serve because they are asked, because they want to. They gratefully look around them and see a little bird in distress and pick it up, bandage its wounds, overfeed it—all out of something bestowed in them by a loving Heavenly Father. This service is never prompted by gain nor personal gratification, but rather, grows out of a love not qualified by earthly experience or time, but limitless like purity and charity. Is it possible that so priceless are these qualities that our Father in Heaven has put a restraining order, if you will, upon Satan that he shall not have power to tempt or to change little children? The scriptures say:

*But behold, I say unto you, that little children are redeemed from the foundation of the world through mine Only Begotten;*

*Wherefore, they cannot sin, for power is not given unto Satan to tempt little children, until*

*they begin to become accountable before me. [D&C 29:46–47]*

Can we learn the power of this serving anxiously with a full heart and intent? What power and beauty it brings to our lives! Think of the manifold opportunities around you—in and out of the Church—to serve your fellowmen, not for reward or the accolades of people, but because needs are seen, and quietly and anxiously one seeks to fill those needs. Listen, listen to the Savior's classic story of serving others:

*When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:*

*And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:*

*And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.*

*Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:*

*For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:*

*Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.*

*Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?*

*When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?*

*Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?*

*And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*

*Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:*

*For I was an hungered, and ye gave me no meat:  
I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:*

*I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked,  
and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye  
visited me not.*

*Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord,  
when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a  
stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not  
minister unto thee?*

*Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say  
unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the  
least of these, ye did it not to me.*

*And these shall go away into everlasting pun-  
ishment: but the righteous into life eternal.*

[Matthew 25:31–46]

Think about service—missionary service. On the earth today I would guess that there are over one-fourth million living returned missionaries. Think what would happen if they continued their missionary service each year. We could reach the vision that President Kimball has in mind. Think of service that so imbues your life that when you return home you wouldn't stop being a missionary. One of our missionaries, Elder Pratt, baptized only two or three people on his thirty-month mission, and he was totally dedicated, but since returning home and going to medical school, he has seen four medical students baptized.

### **The Power of Enthusiasm**

Finally, may I mention another dimension which has illuminated my life many times. Little children have a zest for life, an eagerness to live it to the fullest, like Elder LeGrand Richards. You know, LeGrand Richards, just before his death, received a letter about the death of his brother. And instead of mourning, he said, "Good for him." "Good for him"—just like that. He had lived worthy, he was old, there were people on the other side waiting, and he had every right to expect the fullness of eternal life. I can tell you from the many discussions I had with Elder Richards that he

looked forward to that day and felt that, each time one of the General Authorities died, he got cheated. He hung on tenaciously, as we know, and lived to be older than any other General Authority in this dispensation. But, he was ready to go, he had a zest to go, and to begin his work there as soon as the Lord decided.

Yes, children are almost perpetually in motion, but in this we learn some valuable lessons. They seek new experiences, they have no pretense or scorn or condescension or pride. They are natural and warm and outgoing. They are excited about the smallest things, and as such, captivate our attention. They experience each day with newness, not building upon the difficulties of the previous day. They don't even remember them. They teach us that spontaneity and excitement for life are essential to happiness and self-fulfillment, and really come from a loving God. Yes, they are the "stick that keeps things stirred up."

They are anxiously engaged and enthusiastic. There is a total extension of themselves into all the dimensions of their lives. Each day is a wonderful, new, expanding experience, unencumbered by the previous day's issues or troubles. Those troubles are forgotten, and new opportunities and joy and living are again theirs. The vitality of their lives in these things is a wonder to behold. If we can retain this great power, how blessed will be the days of our lives and all those who are around us!

Little children are not a trial to our faith or love. They are not instinctively grouchy or self-righteous or hateful. These are acquired traits. Some of the greatest lessons we'll ever need are to hang on to and cultivate these gifts given by a loving Father in Heaven. Remember, no Latter-day Saint should ever be a trial to another Latter-day Saint, but a blessing of joy and knowledge and faith and service and great appreciation for all the blessings of life. There are so many.

My years as bishop taught me that these words of Mormon are absolutely true. I bear you my solemn testimony that they are. From the one hundred or more interviews with eight-year-olds before they were baptized into the kingdom, I know these things are true:

*Little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin. . . .*

*. . . Teach parents that they must repent and be baptized, and humble themselves as their little children, and they shall all be saved with their little children. . . .*

*But little children are alive in Christ, even from the foundation of the world. . . .*

*. . . Wherefore, all children are alike unto me; wherefore, I [the Lord] love little children with a perfect love; and they are all alike and partakers of salvation. [Moroni 8:8, 10, 12, 17]*

Let us “become as a little child” in these important dimensions. May we, this day and always, remember these words of the Savior and retain and develop the powers

given to us very early in our earthly lives: the power of believing, the power of faith, the power of obedience, the power of service, the power of near-perfect love, and the power of boundless enthusiasm for the really true things of our Father in Heaven. Add to these all the intelligence and knowledge we can gain through our personal effort, here at the university and after we leave, and the gift of the Holy Ghost, and then our lives will be full and boundless and enriched and infinitely more useful. I know these sound like simple little things tonight, but they are the substance of life as we grow older. Where happiness is found in a home, in a ward, in a companionship, these things are also found. They are empowered and blessed from on high, and they are never forgotten no matter what degree or station we achieve. May God bless us to hold fast and develop them, I humbly pray and leave my personal witness that these things are true, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.