

A Gospel of Relationships

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I am very grateful for my affiliation with this university. Five of my children have also enjoyed attending BYU. I remember one of them suddenly becoming aware of changes in his life after he entered BYU following service as a missionary. He had dated in high school and had had a lot of fun just “hanging out” with girls. After his mission he resumed dating and expected the same casual fun and games. He returned from his first postmission date, however, somewhat pale and shaken. When I asked about the date, he replied, “This is not just high school fun and games. These women are playing with real bullets.” Yes, you are not just playing a game at this stage of life. This is for real.

The young adult years lay the foundation for your future. Changes in relationships are one of its most powerful challenges. Leaving the home and family environment, living with roommates, making new friends, and establishing the relational habits for eventually marrying and building a family of one’s own are challenges that become very real. Relationships form the very basis of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ taught that all of the gospel laws hang on our ability to love God and others (see Matthew 22:37–40). All of God’s laws are ultimately laws of love. Every commandment is given out of love for you and concern

for your happiness. Every commandment ultimately tests your ability to love Him and your fellowman.

Just as God has a gospel of relationships, Satan proposes counterfeit principles that eventually lead to the destruction of relationships, both with God and with others. God teaches you to love others and to learn to live in a Zion society. Satan encourages jealousy, competition, and uncharitable judgments. These keep you from feeling close and connected to others. God teaches you eternal progression and faith in the Atonement, while Satan teaches its counterfeit—perfectionism—which destroys your confidence in yourself and others. God teaches eternal marriage, where love lasts forever. Satan encourages relationships that are selfish and end when they become inconvenient. I would like to discuss these three principles and their counterfeits in the context of what I have learned about relationships from the gospel of Jesus Christ, my work as a clinical psychologist, and 34 years of happy marriage.

I once took my little grandson to a seafood restaurant. They had a large tank full of live

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lobsters. My grandson watched with awe as the lobsters moved around in the tank, seemingly oblivious to the fact that they would soon be selected for somebody's dinner. My grandson watched entranced for a while and then asked me, "There is no lid on the tank and it's not very deep. Why don't the lobsters just crawl out and go home? And then nobody will eat them." We watched for a few minutes more, and then I noticed a curious phenomenon. If one lobster began to try to crawl out of the tank, the others would grab, pull, push, or tug to get the lobster back down into the tank. None could escape and go home because they were all too busy pulling each other back into the tank. I wondered what would happen if they ever figured out that if they could lift and help each other, there might not be any more lobster on the menu of that restaurant.

Sometimes people behave like the lobsters. If one gets a little ahead or looks like they might have figured out a way to safety, others clamor to pull them back, and in so doing, no one escapes. Why do people do this? Is it jealousy?

Look around you. Notice how much people vary. They vary not only in appearance but also in their personalities, life experiences, mortal challenges, and missions here on earth. When we become aware of those differences we may feel jealous of others. Yet the scriptures teach that there are reasons for our differences. We learn from the scriptures that "all have not every gift given unto them" (D&C 46:11). We are all given weaknesses to teach us humility and compassion (see 1 Corinthians 1:27, 2 Corinthians 12:10, Ether 12:27). We also are different so that we each might have something to contribute and some way to belong (see 1 Corinthians 12:14–22, 25–26). When we learn to love each other and have respect for our different abilities, we prepare ourselves to live in a celestial order. Each person edifies the other, and then the whole can become a Zion society.

God teaches us to love one another, and yet you may still find yourself experiencing feelings and thoughts that are less than loving. Sometimes it is a challenge to stop being jealous and wrongly judge each other. We all "see through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Our personal experience is limited. It is often easy to look at another's situation and believe that we see it accurately when, in fact, we do not. It is easy then to come to believe that you can "work out another's salvation" for them because *you* know what is wrong with their life. However, we do not always know another's private challenges, sorrows, and disappointments. Even more important, we do not know God's unique plan for that person's life and may risk prescribing the wrong solutions. When we judge uncharitably and attempt to prescribe solutions for other people's lives, we run the risk of speaking counter to the Lord's will for that person.

Let me illustrate with an object lesson. Here is a pair of glasses that was prescribed for me. The optometrist did a careful examination of my eyes and discovered that I must meet some specific needs to see correctly. These glasses are bifocals. They are also especially ground for a prescription that is a -11 in one eye and a -13 in the other. I suspect there are few individuals in the audience that would see well out of these glasses. Think what your experience would be like if I insisted that you wear my glasses every day to do your work. They work great for me, but what if I assumed that they would also be perfect for you and imposed that solution on you? You would be miserable, and you would probably resent me for imposing the wrong prescription on you. Even more important, with my prescription you could not do the work that is yours alone to do. God is the one who must fit the prescription for each of us. Only He has the knowledge and wisdom to know our unique needs.

How does He reveal His will to an individual? One of the greatest gifts you have

with which to work out your own salvation is the gift of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost can help each of us understand what the Lord would have us do. The Holy Ghost, however, is like the Liahona of old in that it works on condition of our obedience to commandments. In addition, we have the words of both ancient and modern prophets. We can trust the Holy Ghost to help us understand their words in the context of our own lives. We can also have more personal instruction from prayerful temple attendance, patriarchal blessings, and additional priesthood blessings.

We must be careful not to interfere with these spiritual processes in each other's lives by gossiping, judging, or giving uninspired advice that may come from our own biases, prejudices, and blind spots, however well meaning we may be. A study that I did on LDS women and depression showed that LDS women who relied on a process of personal spiritual introspection, then seeking answers and spiritual confirmation from the Lord through prayer, had better mental health than those who were overly concerned about judgments, gossip, and evaluation from others who had not been given any divine authority to do so.

Another reason that it is difficult to escape the trap of uncharitable judgments and jealousy is because you live in a world that is constantly evaluating and judging *you*. So many opportunities and evaluations are based on "beating out" someone else. The world teaches you that you have no right to self-respect unless you are first, get the highest grade, are number one, or win a competition. There is only room at the top for a few in this telestial world. Nevertheless, you are not here to prepare to live in a telestial world. You are here to learn how to prepare yourself to obtain celestial glory. In the celestial kingdom there is room for all who qualify. Entrance is not determined by winning a competitive race (see Ecclesiastes 9:11). *All* who enter into the covenants set by God and then keep those covenants can qualify

(see Mosiah 5:5–9; D&C 25:13–15, 66:2, 97:8). You need not be the "swift nor the strong," the most beautiful, the thinnest, the most talented, nor the highest achiever. What God requires of each of us is that we do whatever is our unique mission on earth to do and "stay in the race" that eventually culminates with exaltation and eternal life (see 1 Nephi 22:31, 2 Nephi 31:15, Omni 1:26).

When we are consumed with competition, we lose sight of that which God has given to us personally. When we fail to value our own gifts and instead covet those of others, we risk losing the chance to magnify our own calling in life. We cannot rise to the full measure of our own creation if we are continually trying to be someone else.

The second pair of opposing principles is becoming perfected through Christ and the Atonement versus Satan's counterfeit of perfectionism. Christ's admonition "Be ye therefore perfect" is not a commandment to possess all skills, knowledge, and good qualities immediately. It is a commandment to enter into a covenant process that involves repentance, change, and growth. This process is dependent on the Atonement, which makes repentance possible. President Joseph Fielding Smith clarified this concept in saying:

*Salvation does not come all at once; we are commanded to be perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect. It will take us ages to accomplish this end, for there will be greater progress beyond the grave, and it will be there that the faithful will overcome all things, and receive all things, even the fulness of the Father's glory. [Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 2:18]*

The Prophet Joseph Smith also described the path to perfection as a journey rather than as an attribute acquired in mortality. He stated:

When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave. [HC 6:306–7]

Have you ever wondered how perfectionism can influence relationships? Perfectionists experience excessive shame in having weaknesses and making mistakes. They believe that they are only of value if they are performing perfectly in all that they do. Perfectionists may also believe that other people must excel and perform in all areas of their lives or they are inadequate and unworthy. Close relationships provide us with a ringside seat to each other's struggles, sensitivities, and shortcomings. If you demand instant perfection from yourself or others, it becomes difficult to share struggles and disclose your weaknesses for fear of losing the relationship. There is then no way to provide support for each other in overcoming those weaknesses and challenges. Alma taught at the waters of Mormon that one of the first covenants of baptism is to "bear one another's burdens" (Mosiah 18:8–10).

When you can openly discuss weaknesses and problems without fear of rejection or ridicule, you can create a "safe place" in the relationship. Having the safety to explore problems in an empathic and caring relationship facilitates the kind of self-examination that is necessary for change and growth to take place. When you can let go of perfectionism, it is easier to feel emotionally close to others. Ironically, we often love those people most whose weaknesses and struggles we know.

Learning how to have close friendships is one of the best ways to prepare for marriage. Whether or not you have the opportunity to

date, meet a romantic partner, and marry at this stage of your life, you can still progress toward that goal by learning how to have good friendships with others. Therefore, the third principle I want to discuss is God's plan for eternal marriage versus Satan's plan to destroy relationships. Love has been described as "friendship that has caught fire." Learn how to be friends first, as the foundation for the relationship. Add the capstone of romantic attraction last. A relationship where you can be friends and share thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, activities, and interests with one another is more likely to stay on fire than one that can share only physical attraction. That capstone of attraction can then be a great gift from God. When you use that attraction as God intended and keep it within the bounds that God has set, it has the force and power to keep the friendship of marriage "on fire" and forge a bond of love between a man and a woman that can last through all eternity.

God created you in His image so that you might become like Him. The Lord teaches in latter-day revelation that one of the purposes of the earth's creation was to provide the opportunity for marriage, which enables us to progress toward exaltation.

And again, verily I say unto you, that whoso forbiddeth to marry is not ordained of God, for marriage is ordained of God unto man.

Wherefore, it is lawful that he should have one wife, and they twain shall be one flesh, and all this that the earth might answer the end of its creation. [D&C 49:15–16]

Many young people fear making a commitment to marriage because they fear they cannot keep love alive. Others may also mistakenly believe, "If I can only find the 'right one,' then my marriage will be perfectly happy all of the time and we will never have any problems." How do you stay in love with someone through all of the challenges of real

life, e.g., raising children, disappointments, trials, and discovering each other's weaknesses and vulnerabilities?

Heinz Kohut, a psychologist who studied human relationships, stated, "Love is the very painful realization that other people are real." A person may enter marriage with the belief "If my spouse truly loves me, he or she will always think what I think, want what I want, and feel what I feel. Then I will know I have married the 'right' person." If you believe this then it is easy to believe that any differences are a betrayal of that love or a sign of incompatibility. You may even believe that you must compel your spouse to become a replica of yourself in order to be compatible. In reality, all marriages have differences. People enter into marriage having different genetics, backgrounds, childhood experiences, family dynamics, traditions, and personal meanings of events. When you can understand your spouse through the lens of *their* own background and experiences, it can help you have a more empathic and accurate understanding of their behavior.

In troubled marriages individuals are often quick to jump to the most condemning, negative explanations for their spouse's behavior. You can explain most behaviors in more than one way. When multiple explanations are available, choosing with charity and compassion will strengthen goodwill in the marriage. It is helpful to communicate this goodwill and good intentions to one another.

Let me share a personal story of how I learned this lesson. When I was first a young bride, I noticed that my husband and I had differences in our needs for orderliness. My husband was a scientist and performed best under conditions of exactness. I have more of a creative temperament. I perform best when I can act more spontaneously. I began to notice that he would follow me around as I did creative projects and clean up everything before I even finished. I interpreted this as a criticism of

my housekeeping and felt threatened and hurt. I thought, "He thinks I am a bad wife, because I am not as orderly as he is."

When I tearfully confronted him with what I perceived as his displeasure with me, he was genuinely surprised. He explained that he recognized that I did not enjoy cleaning up and he honestly desired to do something to lighten my responsibilities and make my creative projects more fun for me. He further explained that because he enjoyed organizing things, he saw this as a way that he could show his love for me by doing what he did best. When we were able to communicate honestly and nondefensively with one another, the bad feelings went away. It helped me that he could verbally express his good intentions to me so that I could understand him more accurately. It helped him that I was able to trust those good intentions instead of judging his behavior wrongfully.

Often those differences between marriage partners are what attracted you to each other in the first place. Differences can help to fill the gaps in abilities that may be missing in our own personality and help to round out the family. For example, when a child falls off a bike, one parent might say, "You're okay. Get up and try again." The other may respond, "Are you okay? Do you need a Band-Aid?" These subtle differences between the two parents can help the child to get a more balanced experience in the family than if one parent's style must always prevail. The child needs to learn both courage as well as tenderness. If the parents are caught in an argument over whose response is correct, the child may miss the benefit of the gifts of both parents.

When couples disagree, they often waste time and emotional energy trying to attach blame to each other. Each believes that the other is at fault and that convincing the spouse of his or her guilt will then solve the problem. They may also believe that nothing can change unless their spouse changes first. The argument

goes back and forth like a Ping-Pong ball, but nothing ever really changes. For example, one says, “You’re mean, and you are mad all of the time.” The other responds, “I am only mad because you are always telling me what to do.” Then the ball goes back to the first: “Well, I have to tell you what to do because you are selfish. I can’t ever get you to do anything I ask of you.” Then back to the second one: “I only do that because you are a nag.”

In this dialogue neither is willing to accept responsibility for *their own* need to grow, because neither will let go of what they cannot change in the other. It remains a battle of who must change first. Neither will accept the challenge to grow and become more like Christ unless the other does so first. Accepting responsibility is the beginning of real personal power in relationships. If you can be courageous and loving with yourself, you can begin to look at your own personal areas of needed growth. You are then empowered to have a very different experience. You no longer need to consider yourself a victim who cannot grow because of another’s behavior. Even when you cannot change another, you can still choose to continue your own growth toward becoming a celestial person. Although the relationship may not be perfect, it can still become a means through which you can grow.

Taking responsibility for our own growth requires both love and faith. When we are willing to examine our lives, we become aware of our need for the Atonement. This draws us closer to Christ. As we struggle with our weaknesses, we develop empathy for how hard it is to change and we become less angry with our spouse for not being able to change as quickly as we wish. When we can acknowledge our dependence upon the Atonement, we realize how much Christ loves us. Christ did not wait to love us until we were perfect, had overcome all our weaknesses, or had fully developed our ability to love him. He loved us *first* and was willing to show that love by suffering in

Gethsemane and dying on the cross for our sins, infirmities, and weaknesses (see 1 John 4:19). By drawing closer to Christ, we can build our spiritual and emotional reserves and have more love and patience to give to our spouse. Ironically, it is often our own capacity to love that makes us more lovable to others.

Learning how to love requires that we stretch and extend ourselves in service to another. When we truly love, service can be experienced as a gift we freely choose to give rather than a chore or burden that is demanded. When we are willing to sacrifice to provide dependable, consistent concern for the life, welfare, and feelings of each other, love can be kept alive even through life’s difficult challenges.

Sometimes individuals are afraid of service because they confuse it with subservience, subjugation, or loss of power. The Lord’s plan for relationships does not include any form of unrighteous dominion or dictatorship. Power in marriage, as in any other context, should be “inseparably connected” to principles of righteousness (see D&C 121:36–42). Real power comes from doing service in a spirit of love, kindness, gentleness, meekness, and love unfeigned. This kind of service can bind another to us so that they are in the relationship because they choose it freely, not because they are forced or compelled. In this kind of relationship, no one need fear submission to the other.

Paul’s admonition to wives to “submit yourselves unto your own husbands” (Ephesians 5:22) has sometimes erroneously been used as justification for unrighteous dominion in marriage. A more careful reading of the surrounding verses, however, makes it clear that the command is to *submit to love* rather than to domination. Husbands are commanded to “love [their] wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Ephesians 5:25). Submitting to love means that we allow our hearts to be vulnerable to a righteous spouse. We become more tenderhearted and

gentle with our husband or wife. We then no longer consider kindness and service as subjugation or a burden. They are gifts of love. When *both* husband and wife provide consistent, dependable service to one another to show their love, no one need fear vulnerability or loss of power.

Some worldly philosophies suggest that service and sacrifice to another will cause you to lose your own identity. President Spencer W. Kimball wisely counseled that service can strengthen identity rather than diminish it. He stated:

In the midst of the miracle of serving . . . , we find ourselves. (See Matt. 10:39.)

Not only do we “find” ourselves in terms of acknowledging guidance in our lives, but the more we serve our fellowmen [and I would add our spouse] . . . , the more substance there is to our souls. . . . Indeed, it is easier to “find” ourselves because there is so much more of us to find! . . .

. . . So often, our acts of service consist of simple encouragement or of giving mundane help with mundane tasks, but what glorious consequences can flow from mundane acts and from small but deliberate deeds! . . .

*There is great security in spirituality, and we cannot have spirituality without service! [Spencer W. Kimball, “First Presidency Message: Small Acts of Service,” *Ensign*, December 1974, 2, 5]*

A marriage need not be perfect and without challenges to be one of great joy and peace. Peace comes not from a lack of problems and disruptions but from knowing that one’s life is in harmony with the will of God (see John 14:27, 16:33). When we struggle in important relationships and we lack the wisdom we need, these problems can bring us to our knees in prayer. The Lord can then instruct us how to learn to live more closely to an eternal model of relationships. You need not fear the challenges of marriage if you and your spouse will *both* commit yourselves to this process of learning

how to become eternal, celestial companions. Elder George Q. Cannon said it beautifully:

*We believe in the eternal nature of the marriage relation, that man and woman are destined, as husband and wife, to dwell together eternally. We believe that we are organized as we are, with all these affections, with all this love for each other, for a definite purpose, something far more lasting than to be extinguished when death shall overtake us. We believe that when a man and woman are united as husband and wife, and they love each other, their hearts and feelings are one, that that love is as enduring as eternity itself, and that when death overtakes them it will neither extinguish nor cool that love, but that it will brighten and kindle it to a purer flame, and that it will endure through eternity. [George Q. Cannon, *JD* 14:320–21]*

If you have not yet found some of these blessings in your life, do not give up. God knows the righteous desires of your heart. He has promised His children that these blessings will eventually be available to *all* who are faithful and put their trust in the Lord throughout the heartaches, trials, and disappointments of mortality.

I bear my personal testimony that the gospel of Jesus Christ as found in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the truth. I bear my testimony that in the Lord’s own time and in His own way the great blessings of eternal marriage can belong to each of us through our faithfulness. Although God has not revealed all to us in this life and we must walk by faith, He has promised us that through the infinite power of the Atonement we can come forth in the resurrection of the just. We will then be free from the thorns and afflictions of mortality and sealed into loving family relationships that will never be taken away. These relationships will last forever. I am thankful for my beloved family and friends who have helped me to appreciate these great promises. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

