

"For They That Are Wise"

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These thoughts on parenting are positioned within a parable that has come to symbolize my hopes and dreams not only for myself, but also for my children. In thirteen short verses in the book of Matthew, we find the account of the ten virgins. "And five of them were wise, and five were foolish" (Matthew 25:2). Given by the Savior during His mortal ministry, the parable of the ten virgins teaches of His second coming, the coming we await and are hopefully anxiously engaged in preparing for. A large part of my preparation for His coming is in the rearing of righteous sons—sons only because that is all that I was blessed with. In the rearing of these sons, I have at times been foolish; and I have at times been wise.

I

I have been a foolish virgin when I allow others to convince me that I parent alone; I am wise when I truly understand that the Lord "will be on [my] right hand and on [my] left," and His spirit will be in my heart and His "angels round about [me] to bear [me] up" (D&C 84:88).

One day as I graded papers, the words in a student's essay, *coming from a broken home*, jumped out at me. I spoke with the student and asked her to help me understand her use of the phrase "broken home." She explained how a text in another class described homes with only one parent as broken. My student had been offended, angered by this negative label that others used to describe her reality, yet at the same time she had chosen to use this same phrase to describe her family to me. I wondered if my own children viewed our home as broken. I wondered at the power of a word to label my reality.

The phrase, "broken home," emphasizes what a home is missing, overlooking the fact that the absence of one parent or even the presence of two, does not assure wholeness. "Brokenness" is a label unworthy of our adoption. Another label whose use warrants our attention is that of "single parent." When women introduce themselves as single parents, I fear that their use of this label puts limits on them. President Gordon B. Hinckley said: "Somehow we have put a badge on this large group. It reads 'singles.' I wish we would not do that. You are individuals, men and women, sons and daughters of God, not a mass of

'look-alikes' or 'do-alikes.' Because you do not happen to be married does not make you essentially different from others."¹

"Single parent" implies difference for me, so I choose to describe my situation as parenting singly. In saying this I am not defining what I am, but how I do things. Parenting singly does not imply being less than whole, but rather states how I am accomplishing my stewardship as a parent. I parent singly. But, even with this enlightened taxonomy I err. Heavenly Father has taught me that even though I have not had a partner in the rearing of my sons, I have *never* been alone. He has surrounded me with a wonderful family and ward, He has encircled me in His arms (D&C 6:20) and enabled me to deal with the stresses of rearing children, working and attempting to further my education. My reliance on my Father in Heaven and my Savior Jesus Christ has enabled me to see that single parenting is a phenomenon experienced by those who've lost their faith in God. It is through my faith in God that I have been able to move beyond coping, to creating the kind of life that will put my family on the straight and narrow path. I trust in the words of Paul that the trials of our faith are "more precious than of gold" (1 Peter 1:7) and in the counsel of the great prophet Alma to his son Helaman "that whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions, and shall be lifted up at the last day" (Alma 36:3).

The Lord has given us a remedy for feelings of loneliness and self-pity that are often externally imposed and implanted. "Wherefore my beloved brethren [and sisters], pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love" (Moroni 7:48). By asking to feel and be filled with the love of our Father in Heaven and our Savior Jesus Christ, we are less likely to fall prey to the adversary who would have us believe that in our parenting, that in our individual lives, we have been left alone. In asking to feel the love of God, we receive his assurance that we are not alone, that He reaches our reaching, that with Him all things are possible.

II

I have been like a foolish virgin in my attempts to control my children's choice; I have been wise in trying to allow them their right to choose.

In 2 Nephi 2, we read what Lehi taught for the profit and learning of his children. "For there is a God, and he hath created all things, both the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are, both things to act and things to be acted upon. Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other" (2 Nephi 2:14, 16).

Some of the most important concepts our children can ever learn is how to act and what to do when acted upon. In the Doctrine and Covenants we read that "it must needs be that the devil should tempt the children of men [meaning my children as well as yours], or they could not be agents unto themselves; for if they never should have bitter they could not know the sweet" (D&C 29:39). If we speak to our children for their profit and learning, we will teach them that "being enticed," being tempted, is an integral part of His eternal plan.

When our children, or ourselves, are bombarded with the darts of the adversary (see 1 Nephi 5:24; D&C 3:8), we need to remember that our response to bitterness makes possible an eternal sweet.

The scriptures are clear about the necessity of opposition in our lives, and children seem to understand this bitter-sweet concept. Equally understood is the principle of being agents unto themselves. While one of my greatest roles as a parent is to guide my children as they learn to be agents, one of my greatest struggles as a parent is in allowing them to choose.

Several weeks ago as we sat down to dinner, my sons complained about what had been prepared. Irritated at their pickiness, I said what any good mother would say: "If I hear one more complaint, you will leave this table and have nothing to eat for the rest of the day." Silence. Then the process of labored eating began—a fork in one hand and a glass of water in the other. The short-lived silence was broken when my fourteen-year-old announced that he was going to write a book entitled *Growing Up in a Communist House* or *My Mother, the Communist*. I was being compared to a political system where the equal distribution of economic goods is achieved by dictatorial means.² In this case, both boys were being required to eat an undesirable entree!

Trying not to laugh, I asked exactly what he meant by *communist*. My twelve-year-old replied, "Well, we have no free will." While I know this dinner conversation was in jest and that many foods have become favorites as the result of communistic table tactics, I couldn't help but reflect on the times when in an effort to push my children along the straight and narrow path, I have made dictatorial decisions that have overridden their agency.

Granted there are times, when as parents, we are required to override personal choice for the safety and protection of a child. At other times, however, we have to allow a child freedom to choose—without allowing them freedom from the consequences of their choices. Overrides for protection are easy, consistency in meting out consequences more tough, but actually allowing a child to choose is often most difficult.

I learned first hand about overriding a child's choice when my youngest son was awarded an honorable mention in an essay contest. He had written the essay while I was away on a trip and had refused his grandmother's offer to act as an editor. This truly was his work. Being the proud parent that I can sometimes be, I volunteered my son to read his essay in Relief Society. When I informed him of this great opportunity, he said he wouldn't do it. I told him he had to read his essay because the Relief Society instructor was counting on him, and I had promised that he would. With tears in his eyes he looked at me and said, "But Mom, you stole my choice."

On the following Sunday my son sat silently by my side awaiting his part in the lesson. Half way through the reading of his first page he broke into tears. I left my chair on the front row and stood behind him at the podium. I asked if I could read his essay for him. He shook his head no, choked back his tears, and finished reading as fast as he could. We left the Relief Society room together, and the weight of my taking away his choice was heavy on my mind. I gave him a hug, asked if he were all right, and offered to take him home. He opted to go to

Primary; and as he left me in the hallway said, "Mom, it's hard to be the only guy in a room." It is hard to stand alone. It's also hard to be a mother who realizes she did something a heavenly parent would never do—take away one's right to choose.

III

I have been a foolish virgin in my attempts to solve my children's problems and provide all the answers; I have been wise in encouraging them to ask, to seek, and to find.

"What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24).

C. S. Lewis wrote the following about this passage: "The New Testament contains embarrassing promises that what we pray for with faith we shall receive. Mark 11:24 is the most staggering. Whatever we ask for, believing that we'll get it, we'll get. No question, it seems, of confining it to spiritual gifts; *whatever* we ask for. No question of a merely general faith in God, but a belief that you will get the particular thing you ask.³

Lewis concluded that such answers to prayer—getting whatever is asked for—comes only to the most believing, requiring a faith that few can attain. My own personal testimony, having "tried the experiment, and planted the seed" (Alma 32:33), is that receiving answers to prayer, receiving personal revelation, is not held for the few, but *is* available to all who are willing to ask.

In 1835 Bronson Alcott, father of *Little Women* author Louisa May Alcott, founded the Temple School in Boston. Alcott engaged his young students, ranging in ages from five to twelve, in weekly conversations on the four Gospels. Listen to this discussion which followed the reading of a passage in the book of John:

Mr. Alcott: Where did Jesus get his knowledge?

Student: Jesus knew what was in man, because God told him.

Mr. Alcott: In a different way from what he tells you?

Student: No; but Jesus was better, and God told him more.

Mr. Alcott: Does God's telling depend on you or on God?

Student: God tells us all we ought to know always.⁴

Both this master teacher's question, "Does God's telling depend on you or on God?," and his pupil's insightful answer, "God tells us all we ought to know always," teach important eternal truth. In the April 2000 general conference, President Boyd K. Packer taught that our ability to receive promptings from the Holy Ghost "is awakened with prayer and cultivated 'by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.'⁵ " God's telling does depend on

us. Does "God tell us all we ought to know always?" President Packer recently encouraged young adults in the church to "begin asking for the gift of the Holy Ghost." He shared how the scriptures contain over seven hundred admonitions to ask. "The message that is most repeated in all revelation is said in many ways but said simply 'Ask and ye shall receive.'" [6](#)

Our Heavenly Father will tell us all things, and His telling depends not only on our personal righteousness but also on our willingness to ask. One of my greatest challenges as a parent is teaching my children not only how to "ask," but also how to discern what it is they have received. These important principles of asking and discerning involve internal, private processes that are not readily seen.

I was given this potted plant for Mother's Day several years ago. As I admired the artwork on the pot I asked for the artist's interpretation. My son pointed out a campfire, his rendering of a tent, and me scaling what appears to be the Swiss Alps. While I occasionally speak of my love for mountains and hiking, I was touched by a small son's ability to capture a passion that is talked about, but rarely seen. Children do learn through example, but this simple gift taught me that children also internalize even our most briefly expressed hopes and dreams. Each time I water this plant, I reflect upon the message of the pot. Can simple expressions of how I involve the Spirit in my life leave mountain-like impressions?

While I was preparing this talk, my boys continually checked on my progress, asking, "Mom, how's your talk coming?" During one such progress interview, I skirted their question and asked, "Do you know how I'll make this talk better?" One of my son's experiences in writing led to this response, "Well, in writing and rewriting and rewriting." I affirmed his comment, then pointed up. What followed was a short, but understanding reply, "Ohhh, the Lord." My son left the room; end of interruption—not really an interruption, but a teaching moment in disguise.

This brief conversation allowed me to spread some eternal seed, but mere acknowledgment of my willingness to ask will not be enough for these seeds to swell, sprout, and grow. I constantly seek teaching moments where I'll be able to share with my sons how I try to allow the Holy Ghost to be my guide.

A minor misdemeanor with honesty provided one such opportunity. The guilty party was called in for a chat, we reviewed the steps of the repentance process, and I told him I needed some time to decide what the consequence package would contain. Fortunately we were charting new territory, and I didn't have a solution already in the bag. I sat down at my desk and made a list of all possible actions that could be taken. The items at the top of the list were rather severe, and my anger seemed to flow onto the paper through my pen. As I continued to brainstorm, the severity of the items on the list subsided. At twenty-five possible punishments, my emotional equilibrium had been partially reestablished. With my pet punishments selected—the most severe on the list of course—I was ready to act as judge and jury. I wanted this to be a lesson my son would grow old telling his children about, if, in fact, he ever grew old!

Knowing that those in heaven had a keen interest in this young man who was about to feel

the wrath of a telestially tormented mother, I prayed to my Heavenly Father to know what was the right course of action. I started at the top of my list and asked, "Is this an appropriate punishment?" I felt nothing. I did not feel the Spirit in the way he most often communicates with me. This stupor was, in and of itself, my answer; but I wanted to make sure I hadn't "heard" incorrectly. So, I rephrased the question and asked, "This isn't an appropriate punishment?" Wham! I received a strong confirmation of the Spirit that my most severe, my most prized, punishment had just fallen out of the top twenty-five. I proceeded to ask about each item on the list, allowing the Spirit to guide me to the action my Father in Heaven would have me take. In the end only three of my twenty-five punishments remained; and as you can probably guess, a loving Heavenly Father was much kinder than a mother with telestial vision.

I called my son in to discuss the consequences of his choice, and I shared with him the list of potential punishments, the majority of which had lines drawn through them. I explained how I had asked the Lord to help me know what would best teach this important lesson in honesty. I shared my process of asking specific questions that required yes or no answers. A yes answer acknowledged by a confirmation from the Holy Ghost in the way he manifests himself to me; a no answer resulting in a stupor of thought or no clear sense of direction. We then talked about how my son feels the Spirit and ended this teaching moment with the charge for him to experiment with the process and allow the Holy Ghost to be his guide.

This first lesson and all that have followed since can not make my son ask. My hope, however, is that with review, they will remember in times when they "are tempted to make the wrong choice" to take a moment and ask, "Is this an appropriate action?" If they don't receive a confirmation from the Holy Ghost in the way the Spirit speaks to them, they will know they can rephrase the question and ask, "This is not an appropriate action?"

If our children see our trust in the Lord and our willingness to lean on Him instead of our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5), they will be more willing to put their trust in Him. The process of taking the Holy Spirit for our guide is not easy. Elder Neal A. Maxwell helps us understand why.

When we speak about teaching by the Spirit it is not about a mystical process which removes responsibility from the missionary or teacher [and I'll add parent] for prayerful pondering and preparation. Teaching by the Spirit [learning by the Spirit] is not the lazy equivalent of going on "automatic pilot." We still need a carefully worked out "flight plan." Studying out something in one's own mind is, in itself, an invitation to the Spirit in our preparations as well as in our presentations. We must not err, like Oliver Cowdery, by taking no thought except to ask God for His Spirit (D&C 9:7). The Lord is especially willing to take the lead of an already informed mind in which things have been "studied out."⁷

I wish I always had the Spirit and that I were willing to ask in all things. But my own lack of personal righteousness and my desires to do my will, instead of the will of the Father, often

prevent his companionship. I know that the Holy Ghost can show us all things that we should do (2 Nephi 32:5), whether it be at home or at work or at school. If we will but first study things out in our minds, come to a decision, and then ask for the confirmation of the Spirit, we can not fail. I must teach this process not only in word, but also in action. I cannot imprint my children, without first being imprinted myself.

IV

They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them; they that were wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

We are like the wise virgins when we set aside the world's labels and fill our hearts with the love of God. We are like wise virgins as we come to understand agency and our tendency as parents to control our children's choices. Further, we contribute to the wisdom of our children by teaching them how to seek the Spirit and take him as their guide.

Joseph McConkie explains, "In the parable of the ten virgins, the five virgins who are prepared to meet the bridegroom are those whose lamps are full of oil, or whose lives are full of the Holy Ghost. These are they who are 'wise and have received the truth, and have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide' (D&C 45:56–57; Matt. 25:1–14)"⁸

In understanding this parable's representation of the Holy Ghost as oil, we see anew the importance of teaching our children about this most precious gift. Just as the wise virgins could not share their oil with the foolish ones, we cannot give our gift of the Holy Ghost to our children. But, we can share the light that his presence brings. We can use the Holy Ghost as our guide and assist our children in trimming their lamps.

We live in a world where people are agents unto themselves—everything fueled by their own self-interest, their own self-gratification. As we teach agency to our children, it must be coupled with a knowledge of the plan, that we are here to do the will of the Father, to help bring about Zion, to see if we will not only be agents unto ourselves but more importantly unto God.

The parable of the ten virgins tells of the Second Coming of Christ. If our lamps are not trimmed, if our children's lamps are not trimmed burning brightly with oil, we will not be ready to meet the Bridegroom.

"And at that day, when I shall come in my glory, shall the parable be fulfilled which I spake concerning the ten virgins.

"For they that are wise and have received the truth, and have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide, and have not been deceived—verily I say unto you, they shall not be hewn down and cast into the fire, but shall abide the day" (D&C 45:56–57).

The oil in the virgins' lamps represents the Spirit that must fill each of us, so that Christ's Spirit may in turn fill the earth. It is not until we are filled that we will be able to arise and

shine forth, that our lights and the lights of our children may be standards to the nations. This is my testimony, and I leave it with you in the most noble, glorious and worthy name of our Lord and Savior, even Jesus the Christ, amen.

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, quoted in Kellene Ricks, "Reach Out to Others, LDS Singles Urged," *Church News*, 4 March 1989.
2. Webster's New World Dictionary, Third 3d College Edition, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Joyful Christian: 127 Readings*, 1st Touchstone ed. (1977; reprint, New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1996), 95-96.
4. A. Bronson Alcott, *How Like an Angel Came I Down: Conversations with Children on the Gospels* (Hudson, N.Y.: Lindisfarne Press, 1991), 180.
5. Boyd K. Packer, "The Cloven Tongues of Fire," *Ensign*, May 2000, 9.
6. Boyd K. Packer, CES Fireside, quoted in Emily Cannon, "Elder Packer Urges Young LDS to Understand Gift of the Holy Ghost," *BYU NewsNet*, 5 March 2000, Provo, Utah. .
7. *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory H. Maxwell (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 337-38.
8. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Donald W. Parry, *A Guide to Scriptural Symbols* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), s.v. "olive oil."