

“Christlike Gifts: Gifts from a Loving Heavenly Father” **Connie Sokol**

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What comes to mind when you think of Christlike traits of the Savior? Possibly thoughts of love, sacrifice, patience, priesthood power, and so much more. Now, what happens when we think of Christlike traits about ourselves? Possibly thoughts of, that’s too lofty; I can’t use that description about myself; I’m surviving life right now and can’t think of something so unreachable; or, great, one more thing I need to do that I’m not doing.

But what if I told you that not only are Christlike traits attainable, but they are a powerful and meaningful tool for us to navigate our daily difficulties, right now?

Because the truth is, Christlike traits are not a checklist to achieve. They are not a race to be won. And they are not a gospel burden to bear. They are literally gifts and tools to help us to *become* like Him. As we study and practice and *become* what He teaches, we feel and see ourselves shifting into our true divine identity, shedding perspectives and patterns of the world, and genuinely desiring to be more like Him.

Recently I saw a helpful analogy of this truth in a painting. In my stake—the Salem Utah Woodland Hills stake—they hold special Christ-themed events at Christmas and Easter. At these events they invite stake members to bring Christ-centered artwork to the building where it’s beautifully displayed on tables with greenery, twinkle lights, and soft music playing in the background. As you “wander and ponder” it’s a powerful experience.

One of those paintings caught my eye. At first glance I could tell it had more of a pointillism effect, made with dots. But as I drew closer, I could see that not only was the painting made of hundreds and hundreds of dots, but that each of those dots were painted in small square sections.

The Foothills Ward young women and men had each painted a section with the correctly colored dots and then combined them to create a stunning picture of the Savior.

Like these small squares, we can develop Christlike traits one dot, one section at a time by exercising patience, using our voice, setting healthy boundaries, and showing loving kindness. And over time it creates a soul-etched picture of the Savior written on the fleshy tables of our hearts. We *become* those traits; we become like Him.

On the importance of becoming, President Dallin H. Oaks shared, “From such teachings we conclude that the Final Judgment is not just an evaluation of a sum total of good and evil acts—what we have done. It is an acknowledgment of the final effect of our acts and thoughts—what we have become. The commandments, ordinances, and covenants of the gospel are not a list of deposits required to be made in some heavenly account. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a plan that shows us how to become what our Heavenly Father desires us to become.”¹

We are not to white knuckle the process of developing and sharing Christlike traits. Rather, we are to feel and become better each day as we use these traits as tools. We can accept there isn’t an immediate endgame—it’s about loving the process.

So how do we approach this process? I would like to share three possible ways to approach identifying, developing, and sharing our Christlike traits.

1. Christlike Traits: Purpose in Who You Have Already *Become*

In the book, *The Gap and the Gain* by Dan Sullivan and Benjamin Hardy—the latter who is a Latter-day Saint—share the researched importance of not just looking forward to where we want to be but looking *back* at how far we have already come. In fact, to celebrate and savor the process to this point.

How can we know for sure what traits—sometimes also called spiritual gifts—we may already have, or have developed, or may yet develop? One beautiful way is to read and study our patriarchal blessings. Elder Larry A. Lawrence shared, “Patriarchal blessings are also a good source for seeing our unique, God-given gifts...The Spirit can show us our weaknesses, but He is also able to show us our strengths.”²

As we study our patriarchal blessings, we can feel the joy and divine help of identifying those traits that are uniquely ours. A simple exercise to add clarity could be one that I have shared with others. It’s called SIP. As you read your blessing, look for three things: Spiritual gifts, Instructions, and Promised blessings. While not exhaustive, it’s a helpful way to start seeing specific traits already shared with you by a loving Heavenly Father.

Reading our patriarchal blessings, we are also reminded that our Heavenly Father knows our divine potential. In the recent April 2023 General Conference, we had a landmark of two specific talks on patriarchal blessings! One of those from Randall K. Bennett shared, “[Through] the power of the Holy Ghost, my patriarchal blessing helped me understand my true eternal identity—who I really was and who I could become. [It helped me know, as President Nelson

has taught, that I was ‘a son of God,’ a ‘[child] of the covenant,’ and a ‘disciple of Jesus Christ.’] I knew that I was known and loved by my Heavenly Father and my Savior and that They were personally involved in my life.”³

Another powerful way to see Christlike traits within is to look at difficult life experiences you’ve already gone through. Take a moment and think about which experiences come to mind. As you do, choose one experience you’ve successfully overcome then consider the traits that it helped you see or develop. What traits or gifts increased your capacity and got you through? These soul-testing times can actually be the very catalyst that produces more of the longed-for Christlike traits in our lives.

Sister Wendy Watson Nelson said, “May I suggest that some of the most heart-wrenching, discouraging events in our lives —from which we long to be set free—are actually designed to prepare us with the very skills and understanding the Lord needs us to have. As we draw closer to the Lord and put our total trust in Him, in His power, and in His timing, we can leave our fires of affliction more pure, more refined, and with more skills and understanding, instead of leaving having been burnt to a crisp!”⁴

I invite you take one minute and list those potential Christlike traits your challenge helped you not only seek but that helped you navigate that particular trial.

After twenty-five years of marriage and raising seven children, I went through a divorce. What seemed to be the lowest possible point in my life actually proved to be one of the most sacred experiences that personally bonded me to both my Savior and my Heavenly Father in a way I hadn’t expected or imagined.

During that experience, one day I felt strongly to attend the temple, but not my usual one. This temple was in Provo, about 30 minutes away. It had been a hard week and my heart and even my limbs felt a bit like Atlas, as if I were perpetually bearing a crushing load. As I entered the initiatory area, I was surprised to find that the usually packed benches held only three women. I sat next to the last woman on the bench and opened the scriptures.

For some reason during the previous months, Isaiah had been a surprising strength to me. But this time, I started in the Topical Guide. I began looking for something under “comfort.” For many months I had tried to be strong, clear-headed, and highly functioning. But today, I was tired and needed a spiritual hug.

I glanced at the page, saw a scripture reference that stood out and turned to it. It said, “I am he; yea, I am he that comforteth you...”⁵

In that moment, my eyes got teary, and I felt an overwhelming whoosh of love from head to toe. And ironically, though it was 2 Nephi, it was quoting Isaiah!

At that same moment, I felt a soft tap on my knee and looked up. And there was my dearest friend of 30 years who had moved, looking at me with confused wonder at seeing each other in this temple waiting area. I immediately threw my arms around her neck and started sobbing and

she simply held me. In that moment, I knew. I knew He knew me, and knew my need to feel His love through that tangible comfort from a dear friend who also knew me.

2. Obtain and Develop Christlike Traits: Partner with the Lord to *Become*

As we experience weakness or inability to handle what's before us, we can partner with Heavenly Father and the Savior. Through the Savior's atoning grace, we can increase our capacity to become more like Him in the regular daily doing. Tad R. Callister said, "Because of His Atonement, the Savior has enabling powers, sometimes referred to as grace, that can help us overcome our weaknesses and imperfections and thus assist us in our pursuit to become more like Him. Recognizing the link between spiritual gifts and godhood, [George Q. Cannon] pleaded with the Saints to overcome each manifested weakness *through the acquisition of a countermanding gift.*"⁶

The first time I read that quote I was stunned. *Each weakness can be overcome through a countermanding gift.* And that gift not only helps us with immediate challenges, but is one of the very stepping stones that leads us to become like God our Father. What a beautiful, layered, and purposeful way to help us through this life and prepare for the next!

Beautifully, those countermanding gifts are given through the Savior. To be clear, the Savior's Atonement is not what gives the power. It's the result of the Savior's Atonement that makes the Savior powerful.

President Russell M. Nelson has said, "There is no amorphous entity called 'the Atonement' upon which we may call for succor, healing, forgiveness, or power. Jesus Christ is the source. Sacred terms such as Atonement and Resurrection describe what the Savior did, according to the Father's plan, so that we may live with hope in this life and gain eternal life in the world to come. The Savior's atoning sacrifice—the central act of all human history—is best understood and appreciated when we expressly and clearly connect it to Him."⁷

As I thought about our weakness, and those countermanding gifts given by a generous, powerful, and loving Savior who desires to share them with us, I thought about scripture stories. People who partnered with the Lord to become more than they were before. One of my favorite examples is the brother of Jared. I can't count the number of times I have read this experience, likely because it seems to take a regular person, generally doing the right things, and then uplevels him to more than he could have ever imagined.

Let's go to where the brother of Jared is in Ether 2. Sometimes in Sunday School we can distill his experience down to that he was hanging out at the beach, got lazy, the Lord chastened him, and he repented.

But there is so much to this!

Remember by chapter two that he has already experienced receiving revelation (to leave the Tower of Babel with his friends and family), has been guided by the Lord in a cloud, built

barges, and that he is “highly favored of the Lord.”⁸ He is a good man doing good things. But the Lord had more in mind for him.

Russell M. Nelson says, “The Lord has more in mind for you than you have in mind for yourself! You have been reserved and preserved for this time and place... The Lord needs you to change the world. As you accept and follow His will for you, you will find yourself accomplishing the impossible!”⁹

As I saw this come to fruition for the brother of Jared, one verse stood out to me that shifted my perspective. In Ether 2:14-15 we read, “And it came to pass at the end of four years that the Lord came again unto the brother of Jared and stood in a cloud and talked with him. And for the space of three hours did the Lord talk with the brother of Jared, and chastened him because he remembered not to call upon the name of the Lord... And the brother of Jared repented of the evil which he had done...”

Back to the Sunday School snapshot, we tend to think the brother of Jared got in trouble and he repented. But then I noticed the power of words and a well-placed comma.

We see that it says *twice* that the Lord *talked* with the brother of Jared, *comma*—which could denote a separate action—*and* chastened him. Which says to me potentially it was not just a three-hour lecture and finger pointing. And if we consider other possible meanings for a few of those words we find that chasten can mean refine, and repentance can mean change. The word repentance in the King James Version Bible Dictionary says, “The Greek word denotes a change of mind, a fresh view about God, about oneself, and about the world.” That can add depth to the experience by creating this new way of looking at it.

The Lord *talked* with the brother of Jared, *refined* him, and he *changed*.

That’s powerful. In the scriptures I see this pattern repeated of lower to higher wilderness to mountains; Aaronic Priesthood to Melchizedek Priesthood; baptismal covenants to temple covenants. The Lord takes us where we are, gives us structure, guidance, and practice; and then offers the opportunity to elevate by partnering with us to use that knowledge and experience to become even more.

In this experience, I saw that pattern of upleveling the brother of Jared from where he was—four years doing the daily things—to preparing him through challenges and developing spiritual gifts to meet the Savior Himself.

What traits and gifts did the brother of Jared develop? Innovation, courage, faith, and diligence to name a few. As he used those traits and gifts, it shifted his lens and what he knew about the Lord, himself, and his purpose and identity. It shifted what he saw and understood about who he was and who he could become.

Russell M. Nelson has said, “Oh, there is so much more that your Father in Heaven wants you to know. I plead with you to increase your spiritual capacity.”¹⁰

Why does this matter? Because symbolically, we are each the brother of Jared dealing with a challenge and needing to partner with the Lord to solve it. To increase our spiritual capacity as the prophet has pleaded with us to do. And He helps us do that through developing Christlike traits.

For this next exercise, I invite you to consider a *current* challenge you're dealing with, one that you're not quite through yet. Perhaps one you never thought you would face. What is that challenge? For my dear friend, it's having two kids in different treatment centers in the span of two weeks. For another dear friend it's after a lifetime of selfless service and gospel obedience dealing with all five of her children leaving the church. These challenges are deeply personal and painful, and they require Christlike traits to handle them.

What is one way you can increase your capacity through obtaining a Christlike trait to better deal with your challenge?

President Nelson has said, "It takes *conscious and consistent effort* to fill our daily lives with His words, His teachings, His truths...Daily immersion in the word of God is crucial for spiritual survival."¹¹

May I suggest two tools of "conscious and consistent effort" which have been a lifeline for me going through the challenges of raising seven kids, being now divorced, and developing a business.

First, read the Book of Mormon daily. Every. Single. Day. Don't miss one day of opening those pages and getting something from that book. There is a protection, power, and purpose that you will find when immersing yourself in that most correct and inspired holy writ.

Second, choose a sacred time that is simply for you and your Father in Heaven to connect. I'm inspired by Joseph Smith's example. If I had been 14 and had a question, my go-to personality would have simply dropped to my knees and asked. But Joseph Smith prepared himself, and a place to go to commune with his Father in Heaven, not even knowing what to expect or if that question would be answered.

Prepare a place and a time that lets the Lord know that this matters.

Several weeks ago, I awoke one Saturday morning at 4:16 a.m. I realized I had had a dream and while I'm not a frequent dreamer of this sort, I knew right away to pay attention. I was in a large warehouse kind of building and I was attempting a conversation with someone else. But every time we walked into a room to talk it was full of people and busyness. I kept saying, "It's just so busy, every room is just so busy."

I'm no gospel scholar but even I got the concept. In my heart the thought came, "Connie, I'm trying to have a special conversation with you and there isn't a place to have that." Now, at this time I was attending the temple weekly, reading my scriptures daily, and finding what I called "pockets of peace" to lay down for a few minutes during the day and be still. I was shocked that it still wasn't enough.

Then a second thought followed, “fourth watch.” I remembered hearing that phrase and that it related to the Roman soldiers and their guard duty. Looking up the times, I felt myself cringing for what I felt was coming. Yep, it was from three a.m. to six a.m. Putting those two thoughts together, I felt He was saying, “I want to have a special conversation with you, between three and six a.m.”

Yikes. You know how you hear of people in the scriptures saying, “I will go and do,”¹² and “Behold the handmaiden,”¹³ and all those wonderfully obedient phrases? I did not think of those. The reality hit me that I was exceedingly tired and not at all ready to get up early on a consistent basis. However, as I pondered that my Heavenly Father wanted to talk with seemingly insignificant me, I began to see a bigger picture—that upleveling opportunity. And then, in a fit of religious fervor, I promised Him that I would get up at 5 a.m. this very next week, the whole week, to hear the word of the Lord!

And then I remembered the next week was spring break. The only week of the year I can legitimately, daily sleep in. For a moment I was honestly dismayed. But then another soft thought came next, “Yes, it’s spring break, and it’s also Holy Week.”

Touche. If there was one week of the year to spend extra time with the Lord, that was it.

So, I did get up at five a.m. every day that next week. And I’m here to say that it did make a difference. Not that big production things happened and the heavens literally parted. But I was amazed at the personal revelation He had for me, in everything from my home, to my kids, to schedules, to my physical well-being. The promptings were often subtle and nuanced but oh so helpful and powerful. I continue that practice even now—not every day, but regularly—and am incredibly grateful for His willingness and generosity in sharing revelation.

I invite you to consider what your “conscious and consistent effort”¹⁴ is to connect more fully with the Lord. It doesn’t have to be five a.m. (I can only hope for you it isn’t) but I do believe it will be personal and purposeful to you.

3. Christlike Traits: Joyful Progression as You *Become*

We read about the Savior in Luke 2:52. It says, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” Small and simple steps, intentional and focused, rather than huge, exhausting leaps.

Larry A. Lawrence beautifully shared, “The Holy Ghost doesn’t tell us to improve everything at once. If He did, we would become discouraged and give up. The Spirit works with us at our own speed, one step at a time, or as the Lord has taught, ‘line upon line, precept upon precept...’”¹⁵

As we seek to know which Christlike trait would help us most, we can feel the promptings and follow the guidance, even if, like Naaman washing in the dirty River Jordan,¹⁶ the instruction seems unimpressive. This principle is shown in the conference talk example by Michael A. Dunn in recounting the British cycling team who went from being the laughingstock of the cycling

world to winning the Tour de France an incredible six times, and in the last four Olympics becoming the “most successful country across all cycling disciplines.”

He further detailed how they accomplished it, “They continued to find 1 percent improvements in overlooked and unexpected areas such as nutrition and even maintenance nuances. Over time, these myriads of micro-betterments aggregated into stunning results, which came faster than anyone could have imagined. Truly, they were onto the eternal principle of ‘line upon line, precept upon precept.’”¹⁷

One percent better in overlooked and unexpected areas. Does that resonate with you? Have you felt a nudge to pay attention to a small and simple change that could actually make a big difference? What is a Christlike trait you could develop just *one percent better*?

Several months ago, I felt a divine download—as I call them—to learn Spanish. This one did not make sense to me as I could barely remember my mission-learned Japanese. But the feeling/thought persisted, as did the idea of my neighbor a few doors down. She is our Relief Society president and emigrated from Mexico many years ago, and now her Spanish-speaking mother lives with her. Addi is her name, is an absolute delight, and also desired to work on her English. So, she and I made the plan to meet every other Sunday night for one hour to speak Spanish and English together. It has been the sweetest experience! Getting to know her and her incredible life, and experience her sweet patience with me, has developed lovely, unexpected traits together I hadn’t known it could yield.

Another blessing of developing Christlike traits as we partner with Him is that we don’t have to go at it like an endless, dreaded checklist to begin one lofty, exhausting trait at a time. As we intentionally and actively pursue these traits, they naturally build on each other. It’s such a hallmark of our Heavenly Father’s perfect plan—it’s layered in abundance in all directions.

Robert D. Hales shared “The attributes of the Savior... are interwoven characteristics, added one to another, which develop in us in interactive ways. In other words, we cannot obtain one Christlike characteristic without also obtaining and influencing others. As one characteristic becomes strong, so do many more.”¹⁸

We can put effort into the Spiritual work of line upon line, here a little there a little,¹⁹ and know He is pleased with our attempts. He will take what widow’s mites,²⁰ woman’s mites, or mom mites that we bring, and He can connect, expand, and multiply in ways you and I simply cannot.

Remember that painting of dots by the young women and men I shared about earlier? We can take these simple principles and practices of identifying, developing, and sharing our Christlike traits and then combine and use them for good. We can find purpose in who we have *become* already; partner with the Lord to *become* more than we could have ever imagined; and experience joyful progression as we *become* more like Him.

Paul V. Johnson stated, “We are children of God with a majestic destiny. We can be changed to *become* like Him and have ‘a fulness of joy.’”²¹

Square by square, dot by dot, trait by trait, we are creating and living and becoming this beautiful live image of the Savior within us. What we choose to do starting today, through conscious and consistent effort, will make all the difference in who we become tomorrow.

President Russell M. Nelson powerfully shared, “When the Savior knows you truly want to reach up to Him—when He can feel that the greatest desire of your heart is to draw His power into your life—you will be led by the Holy Ghost to know exactly what you should do. When you spiritually stretch beyond anything you have ever done before, then His power will flow into you.”²²

I pray you will feel the joy and power of actively developing Christlike traits in your life to help you deal with your challenges and draw closer to our loving Savior.

In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” October 2000.

² Emily Abel, “Discerning the Good in Ourselves,” *YA Weekly*, September 2021.

³ Randall K. Bennett, “Your Patriarchal Blessing—Inspired Direction from Heavenly Father”, April 2023.

⁴ Wendy Watson Nelson, “Change: It’s Always a Possibility!” BYU Speeches, April 1998.

⁵ See 2 Nephi 8:12.

⁶ Tad R. Callister, “Our Identity and Our Destiny,” BYU Speeches, August 2012 (emphasis added).

⁷ Russell M. Nelson, “Drawing the Power of Jesus Christ into Our Lives,” April 2017.

⁸ See Ether 1:34.

⁹ Russell M. Nelson, “You Can Accomplish the Impossible!” Brigham Young University-Idaho devotional, January 2015.

¹⁰ Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” April 2018.

¹¹ Russell M. Nelson, “Hear Him,” April 2020.

¹² See 1 Nephi 3:7.

¹³ See Luke 1:38.

¹⁴ Russell M. Nelson, “Hear Him,” April 2020.

¹⁵ Larry R. Lawrence, “What Lack I Yet,” October 2015.

¹⁶ See 2 Kings 5.

¹⁷ Michael A. Dunn, “One Percent Better,” October 2021.

¹⁸ Robert D. Hales, “Becoming a Disciple of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” April 2017.

¹⁹ See 2 Nephi 28:30.

²⁰ See Mark 12.

²¹ Paul V. Johnson, “Be Perfected in Him,” October 2022 (emphasis added).

²² Russell M. Nelson, “Drawing the Power of Jesus Christ into Our Lives,” April 2017.