

## **“Gather to be Perfected but Not Perfect”**

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The last two summers my husband and I had the unique experience walking “the way of Saint James” across Northern Spain, known as the Camino de Santiago. The pilgrimage was initiated over a 1000 years ago to celebrate the spread of Christianity in Europe, traditionally honoring the apostle James for his teaching in Spain. Many people walk in honor of Christ—celebrating how Christ has helped them, or they walk seeking His help and healing.

The Camino de Santiago is marked by rolling green hills, sparkling streams, beautiful wild-flowers, charming Medieval churches, and quaint towns with lots of cows! Last year 347,000 people from 187 countries walked some or all of a Camino path, with the most traditional route being 500 miles long.<sup>1</sup>

My favorite part of the experience was watching people make connections. One father brought his intellectually-gifted son to *disconnect* him from his computer and help him value *connecting* to God and others. Another person walked the path to heal from the insecurity and bitterness resulting from two abusive marriages. Her goal was to open her heart to Christ and seek His healing power as she walked. One college student told me she wanted to know if God loved her and cared about her, “Does He believe in me? With all the people in the world, is there really a God in heaven who knows *me* personally?” Each person had their own reason for walking. What I admired most were those who sought to draw closer to Christ on their journey.

Speaking of a friend, William E. Berrett remarked, “We could warm our hands by the fire of his faith.”<sup>2</sup> I love that metaphor because I imagine a long journey walking together through life, with evening fires to warm our hands. On the Camino route I often saw our BYU students warming their hands by the faith of those around them. Likewise, the fire of their faith warmed

the hands of many strangers they met from all over the world, gathering to share how they experience the light and warmth of our Savior.

## GATHERED IN ONE

Why is *gathering* essential during our mortal pilgrimage? I saw strangers gather to honor Christ, and to remind us that we all belong to one another, brothers and sisters in God's eternal family. The Lord teaches us, "That ye may be gathered in one, that ye may be my people and I will be your God" (D&C 42:9).

What does it mean to be gathered in "one?" During this COVID-19 pandemic, we feel the loss of gathering. Many feel lonely during this time of social distancing. But the Lord reminds us that we are never alone, we are "encircled about eternally in the arms of his love" and safety (see 2 Nephi 1:15, Alma 34:16). We can take advantage of this time to turn to our most important gatherings—with God and with family.

There is a stark contrast between the words "alone" and "atone." Both have the same root word: "one." Alone means: isolated, having no help, and having no one present. In contrast, "atone" means to become united or reconciled.<sup>3</sup> The good news of the Atonement is that we are not alone! We have the Savior! He invites us to be united—at-one—with Him. We progress with Him. We become our best selves with Him. We have hope and happiness because of Him.

Christ invites us into the perfect unity with Him and our Father. "That they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one" (John 17:22-23). Our Savior gathers us to be perfected in Him. Elder Gerrit W. Gong taught, "Our campfire of faith can encourage us to remember perfection is in Christ, not in ourselves or in the perfectionism of the world."<sup>4</sup>

Today I would like to discuss the pathway to perfection, but first it's important to understand the paralyzing impact of *perfectionism*.

## PERFECTIONISM

Psychologist Brene Brown describes perfectionism as,

"a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought: 'If I look perfect, live perfectly, and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, and judgement...Perfectionism is not self-improvement...it is about trying to earn approval and acceptance...[It is] deep fear of failing, making mistakes, and disappointing others."<sup>5</sup>

On The Great British Baking Show, we see contestants square off to see who will become "Star Baker." The amateur baker's contest consists of "technical" and "show-stopper" challenges of making biscuits, cakes, cookies, and breads. The two judges often introduce a technical challenge by saying, "The texture must be perfect, the flavors must harmonize beautifully, each item must look exactly alike. We expect nothing less than perfection!" The stress on the

contestants' faces is captivating. Relief finally comes when "time's up" is called, with some contestants collapsing on the floor as if steam from an Instapot had been released. Tears of disappointment flow when something was overbaked, flavors didn't match, or texture was doughy. We are glued to the screen, with mouths watering to taste just one of those butter-pecan-maple-frosting-laced-tea bisquits. We are stunned that something so delicious-looking is called a failure. Does it really have to be "perfect" to be a success? It's just a baking show, but what about real life? Do we needlessly pour on pressure with a similar standard of perfection?

Social media is perfectionism's battleground. We think, "Kate is a gourmet cook and immaculate housekeeper; while my husband does his own laundry and is lucky to get a bowl of soup." Or, "On Anne's Facebook page her 10 beautiful children are the picture of perfection, while we wake up at 10:00 a.m. and hang out in our PJ's all day." Or, "I'm just a brownie baker, soup maker, and a *perfect* mom faker!"

Perfectionism feeds on self-doubt. "I can't do it," we say. "I'm not as capable as her and I'm too overwhelmed to do it all." I relate to a bumper sticker that says, "God put me on earth to accomplish a certain number of things. Right now I am so far behind, I will never die!" If your weaknesses are overwhelming, you are not alone! We all have imperfections. No one is exempt. And none of us like them. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught us,

"My brothers and sisters, except for Jesus, there have been no flawless performances on this earthly journey we are pursuing, so while in mortality let's strive for steady improvement without obsessing over what behavioral scientists call "toxic perfectionism."<sup>6</sup>

#### PERFECTABILITY

I'm thankful our Heavenly Father doesn't expect us to be perfect—yet. God did not plan for us to have perfect abilities in this life but to embrace our *perfectability*—the ability to become perfect as He is...eventually.

President Russell M. Nelson helps us understand the verse, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). He explains "perfection" comes from the Greek word *teleios*, which means complete, to reach a distant end, to be fully developed, or to finish.<sup>7</sup> No one is complete and fully developed—yet; we are only in the early stages of our eternal pilgrimage.

"There are no ordinary people," wrote C.S. Lewis, "only potential gods and goddesses in our midst."<sup>8</sup> We have potential to become like our perfect heavenly parents. That is our long-term goal, but what about our short-term goal of dealing with our current state of imperfection?

Elder Maxwell taught, "There is no way the Church can honestly describe where we must yet go and what we must yet do without creating a sense of immense distance."<sup>9</sup> We all feel the gap between where we are and where we need to go, much like Camino pilgrims on the first days of their journey, wondering if they will ever reach their destination miles away.

Feelings of inadequacy must not prevent us from pressing forward; they are often the very means by which we open our hearts and seek the Savior's companionship. In D&C 62:1 we read, "Jesus Christ [is] your advocate, who knoweth the weakness of man and how to succor them." We are not left alone to overcome feelings of inadequacy and weakness.

The Savior offers to be our walking companion, as with Enoch when he had self-doubt, "Thou shalt abide in me and I in you; therefore walk with me" (see Moses 6:31-34).

I would like to highlight three things we can do on our mortal pilgrimage to overcome feelings of self-doubt by: 1-Being patient with progress, 2- Focusing on what we can do instead of what we can't do, and 3-Seeing ourselves as Christ sees us.

### **1-BEING PATIENT WITH PROGRESS**

Ten days after my husband and I were married we left for Spain to direct a study abroad group in Madrid. I was excited to learn from him since he was a professor of Spanish literature. We were both older when we met and felt fortunate to finally find each other. We had a short courtship before we married, then hurried off to Spain before knowing each other long. I had just completed graduate work in Family Sciences and was determined to practice the skills and theories I had studied on my new husband. I was confident our marriage would be perfect from day one!

Several weeks into our trip, I felt a little neglected because his mind seemed to be preoccupied with his work. I looked at him one day and said; "Sometimes I feel like you love Spain more than me." He replied smiling, "Well, I've known Spain longer." I wasn't laughing. He thought it was funny. After all, it was a silly question—of course he loved me more than Spain. I was his new bride! He saw the serious look on my face and said something like, "Can we just enjoy where and who we are and not expect our marriage to be perfect, yet?" He was inviting me to be happy with what our marriage was at that stage and not be discouraged with what we hadn't yet created. After all, we had only been married for one month! I learned something important that day about patience, perfection and the creation process.

### **THE CREATION PROCESS**

God is a patient Creator. Elder Richard L. Evans taught, "There seems to be little evidence that the Creator of the universe was ever in a hurry. Everywhere, on this bounteous and beautiful earth, and to the farthest reaches of the firmament, there is evidence of patient purpose and planning and working and waiting."<sup>10</sup> In Genesis 1 we read the account of the creation of the earth. Verse 10 ends the third day of creation with the phrase, "And God saw that it was good." Then, after each subsequent day, we learn the same thing: each day was good. God was content with what He had created thus far. He wasn't concerned that on Day Two they had not yet created beautiful flowers and trees. God was perfectly fine with no animals on day four. My husband reminded me, "At the end of Day Five God did not say, 'After all this work and all this time, all I have to show for my effort is *fish!*'"<sup>11</sup> After each day of creation, God was pleased with that day and progress toward Day Seven.

Our Heavenly Father views our perfectability the same way—each individual day or stage is *good*—even the imperfect stages. I believe He would say to us, “You are good! Look at your progress this day. Look how I have blessed you already.” We can feel satisfaction in our progress each day, imperfect and messy as it may feel, and prepare ourselves for the next day. We should not think that God is disappointed with us because we have not yet reached restful Day Seven. Each day is good—and necessary—in His eyes.

My husband’s request that I “enjoy where and who we are and not expect our marriage to be perfect—yet” was an invitation to be patient. He invited me to see the goodness and growth in the present moment. Like the creation process, I could be happy with my marriage and enjoy each day we had to grow together instead of expecting it to be perfect and *complete* already. It gave me peace that he didn't expect me to be perfect and reminded me to do the same for him.

Patience allows us to walk together without our imperfections blocking our path.

#### PATIENT PROGRESS INSTEAD OF IMMEDIATE PERFECTION

Impatience blinds us to the goodness in front of us. We don’t notice the garbage our husband took out because we wish he were reading to the kids. We don’t acknowledge a daughter who just said “thank you” because we want her to pick up dirty clothes. We overlook the neighbor who raked our leaves because we want him to cut down his tree that’s scattering the leaves. We fail to appreciate a sibling's gesture to wish us a happy birthday because she is 10 days late.

When we are impatient, we miss daily goodness and growth, because it's not good enough—we want it to be better now!

On the other hand, patience helps us cherish others regardless of their imperfections. We enjoy each other without expectations that we have to be better to do so!

One day my daughter made me breakfast in bed for Mother's Day—burnt toast, cooked-to-death eggs, spilled juice, accompanied with a hand-written note, “I love you Mom.” I couldn’t get mad at her for making a mess in the kitchen. I was just happy to be her mom. Focusing on who our children are instead of who they are not enables us to treasure who they are today. Let’s focus on patient progress instead of immediate perfection! “Ye are not able to abide the presence of God now...wherefore, continue in patience until ye are perfected” (D&C 67:13).

On our personal journeys, we can imagine the Savior’s invitation: “Come join Me! Come warm your hands by the fire of My patience! See how I have blessed you already! Walk with me and together the glory of your potential will be made known to you—one day at a time.”

#### **2- FOCUSING ON WHAT WE CAN DO INSTEAD OF WHAT WE CAN’T DO**

I remember a parent-teacher conference when my daughter was in fourth grade. Her teacher explained how my daughter was doing academically and socially and then said; “Just remember, whatever you focus on will increase. If you focus on the negative, the negative will

increase. If you focus on the positive, the positive will increase.” He repeated the same message three times during our visit. As I was leaving, he said again, “You know, the one thing I wish parents would remember is, whatever they focus on with their children will increase.” I smiled, “I think I got it.” And I haven’t forgotten.

“The joy we feel,” President Nelson reminded us, “has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives”<sup>12</sup>—a timely reminder during these unsettled times. Joy will increase if we focus on what we can do instead of what we can’t do, and focus on what we have instead of what we don’t have.

Psychologist Dan Baker explains that fear is the enemy of happiness: “Contemporary fear I’ve found, almost always fits into one of two categories: fear of not *having enough* and fear of not *being enough*....But focusing on weaknesses, like focusing on anything else that’s negative, just reinforces fear.”<sup>13</sup>

Focusing on our fears fuels self-doubt. We hear phrases like, “I don’t know enough. I can’t do it. I’m not smart enough, talented enough, beautiful enough, good enough.” We simply fear we are not *enough*.

Three months into my mission in Guatemala I was assigned to train a new missionary, manage a proselyting area, and train the leaders in thirteen wards and branches in welfare principles. I was paralyzed with fear because I couldn't speak Spanish well. I couldn't understand what Guatemalans were saying to me and they had no idea what I was trying to say to them!

On the day of transfers I approached my mission president—a former colonel in the Marines!—and said, “President, I would never doubt your inspiration but are you sure you weren't thinking of someone else?” He looked at me and sternly replied, “Sister, I had the same concerns about your ability as you have, so I went back to the Lord and he got mad at me for having doubts about you.” Then he turned and walked off. I was speechless. As he walked away, I thought, “Wow, the Lord really knows who I am! He thinks I can do this! If He wants me to do this, then He must be serious about helping me.” Then, an inspired question came to my mind, “Are you willing?” Was I willing to trust the Lord and willing to try with what ability I had at the moment? That experience challenged me to focus on what I *could* do instead of what I *couldn't* do. Hearing from my mission president that the Lord did not doubt *my* ability gave me determination to show God that I did not doubt *His* ability to help me.

#### THE WIDOW’S MITE

God asks that we start wherever we are and go forward from there. We might ask ourselves, “What can I do today with what I do know and with what capability I do have right now?”

The poor widow cast in two mites—her offering to God—very small, but enough (see Mark 12:43-44). We usually think of the story of the widow's mite in terms of our monetary offerings, but it also applies to all our gifts to Heavenly Father.

We offer what we have, like this widow—however seemingly little that may be—knowing our effort is acceptable and sufficient for the Lord. The widow focused on what she could give, not what she couldn't. Likewise, focusing on what we can do, and showing our willingness to try, is a signal to God that we seek His help to enhance what ability we have.

Focusing on our weaknesses blinds us to the “mites” we can offer. A daughter misses soccer tryouts because she fears she’s not good enough, but she overlooks her ability to learn fast and work hard. A young man thinks he shouldn’t serve a mission because he’s shy, but he overlooks his talent for loving people. Or, a mother who doesn’t take a meal to a sick friend because her cooking ability is limited, but she overlooks her talent to give encouraging messages.

Baker adds, “I found that when I could help people find their strengths they didn’t need to go to war against their weaknesses.”<sup>14</sup> President Thomas S. Monson counseled us, “Your strengths are greater than your weaknesses. Finding our strengths, our unique powers, should be a purpose of the journey of life.”<sup>15</sup>

God needs us to find our gifts, talents and strengths and use them for good. We need each other. We grow together. We can learn from so much goodness, strength and talent around us! When we are on a quest to see how good we can become, it is enough for the Lord to work with us and through us to bless lives around us.

Whatever our abilities may be, we often feel stretched to our limits of capability. I imagine the Savior gathering us one by one and calming our fears, “Come warm your hands by the fire of my peace and strength. I don’t doubt your ability to contribute, please don’t doubt My ability to strengthen you.” “Whosoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it, an offering of the Lord” (Exodus 35:5). We honor Christ by offering what we do have and what we can do.

### **3- SEEING OURSELVES AS CHRIST SEES US.**

One of my favorite memories was watching my daughters, as toddlers, staring and laughing at themselves as they sat in front of a big mirror. When they smiled, the mirror smiled back. When they frowned, it frowned back. When they danced, it danced with them. They were amazed by what they saw in front of them.

Our greatest desire as parents is that our children have a positive image of themselves. Our Heavenly parents want the same for us. I still remember this statement attached to a picture of the Savior given to me by a young women leader, “The greatest gift I could give to you is for you to see yourself the way that I see you.”

Too often what we see in the mirror are flaws and imperfections. We may see someone who is weak, fearful, or untalented with too many wrinkles and too much weight to lose. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf said, “Some people can’t get along with themselves. They criticize and belittle themselves all day long....May I suggest that you reduce the rush and take a little extra time to get to know yourself better...Learn to see yourself as Heavenly Father sees you—as His precious daughter or son with divine potential.”<sup>16</sup>

How can we see ourselves as God sees us?

The apostle Paul gives us insight in 1 Corinthians 13. Following the verses on the characteristics of charity, we read verse 12, “For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” Paul did not use the word “glass,” as we have it in the King James Version of the Bible, he used the Greek word for “mirror.” Today, we have mirrors that give us a crystal-clear image of ourselves. But in Paul’s day, they polished metal to function as mirrors, which offered only a blurry reflection of themselves.<sup>17</sup>

What I find most fascinating is that Paul explains this verse in the context of charity. He gives us a key to understand how to know ourselves as we are known by God: recognize God’s charity for us, and share charity with others, then we begin to understand how God sees us.

Charity is defined as the “pure love of Christ” (Moroni 7:47), the greatest of all spiritual gifts. When we understand Christ’s pure love for us, we look at ourselves differently. When we share His charity with others, we achieve a refined character like Him. Then we look in the mirror and see a clear reflection of Christ in our countenance (see Alma 5:19).

Paul taught that we see a blurry reflection of our divine nature now, but as we obtain the pure love of Christ, we will see ourselves as Christ sees us.

#### RECOGNIZING CHRIST’S CHARITY

Do we recognize Christ’s charity for us? Not too long ago, one of my students shared, “I don’t think I am worthy of God’s love. I’ve made too many mistakes and committed too many sins. I find it hard to believe that the Savior could take someone as broken as me and see someone worth helping.” My heart went out to him.

The most important lesson we learn from the Savior about His atoning sacrifice is that He loves us! He paid the price for our sins because we are worth it. He made it possible to overcome physical and spiritual death because we are worth it. He made the pathway to perfection possible because we are worth it! With all He has done for us, He seems to say, “I did it all for you, because *you* are worth it to *me*! You are worthy of my help because of who you really are—a divine child of God with divine potential—that makes you worth helping!” God wants us to know how much we mean to Him.

Thinking of the characteristics of charity as described by Paul can help us understand how we experience Christ’s charity: He suffered for us, is kind to us, He bears all things, hopes all things and endures all things for us. Sister Jean B. Bingham said, “Jesus Christ is the perfect embodiment of charity...His supernal gift of the Atonement, and His continual efforts to bring us back to our Heavenly Father are the ultimate expressions of charity.”<sup>18</sup>



The Savior does not abandon us when we don't feel good about ourselves. He lovingly ministers to us with open arms. We are good enough to be loved, by Him whose charity is more enduring than our self-doubt.

#### SHARING GOD'S CHARITY

How does sharing Christ's charity help us to see ourselves and others through a less critical eye? One mother said, "During our son's teenage years, his behavior was very difficult to manage. I had a hard time loving him. I remember pouring out my heart to the Lord for help and the impression that came to my mind was, 'You may not feel like you can love him for you right now but can you love him for Me? Can you put away your irritations and just love him for Me?' That was a turning point in my relationship with him. I was willing to love my son for God. Something beautiful happened with how I saw my son's goodness. I saw him and myself differently. And I could feel greater love from God for both of us."

Can we love for Christ? President Henry B. Eyring taught, "The place to start is with our own hearts...We can begin today to try to see those we are to nourish as our Heavenly Father sees them and so feel some of what He feels for them."<sup>19</sup> Seeing others through the eyes of God helps us to feel warmth and compassion for one another and ourselves. We learn to see beyond imperfections as we love others and love ourselves—for God. Sharing Christ's charity helps us overcome feelings of self-doubt as we think less about our weaknesses and more about loving for Him.

By experiencing and sharing the Savior's charity, we see who we are and what we may become. We see a reflection of ourselves in God's mirror because we are His children, made in His image.

I imagine Christ calling out to us on our rocky road of insecurity and saying, "Come join me by the fire. Warm your hands with My compassion. I love you! I see your goodness. I see your heart. I see the glorious being you are capable of becoming. Stop the criticism and see yourself as I see you. 'As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love' (John 15:9)."

#### HIGHER AND FARTHER WITH CHRIST

Walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain taught me to be "still." It was an opportunity to be quiet, to ponder, and listen. I was reminded that God was there for me and it motivated me to show God that I was there for Him—to hear Him!

In a medieval book compiled about the Camino de Santiago, we find a Latin hymn that admonishes pilgrims to go, "farther and higher with God's help."<sup>20</sup> Walking the Camino I watched people *gather* from all over the world, to go "farther and higher" with the Savior's help.

All the Camino paths have a destination ending in Santiago de Compostela, a city named after the apostle James. As our students arrived in Santiago, they hugged, cheered and cried as they

gathered to celebrate having completed something truly difficult. What made it meaningful to them were the relationships they built as they walked. They realized how much others helped them, how they were able to help, and how God had helped them. They knew they could not have completed the journey alone.

Likewise, we are not alone on our eternal pilgrimage back to God's presence. Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin reminds us to never give up, "Oh, it is wonderful to know that our Heavenly Father loves us—even with all our flaws. His love is such that even should we give up on ourselves He never will. We see ourselves in terms of yesterday and today. Our Heavenly Father sees us in terms of forever. Although we might settle for less, Heavenly Father won't, for He sees us as the glorious beings we are capable of becoming."<sup>21</sup> God gathers help for us; we have "angels round about [us], to bear us up" (D&C 84:88), on both sides of the veil! We don't always see who is round about to calm our fears, strengthen us and grant us peace. But what we do know is that God sends help! Most importantly, He sent His Son to walk the pathway of perfection with us.

We see evidence of the Savior's footsteps beside us and recognize the warmth of His patience, His strength and His charity. He calls out, "Abide in me, and I in you, therefore, walk with Me." We honor Christ by being patient with ourselves and others. We honor Him as we focus on what we can do, offering our best to build His kingdom. We honor Him by sharing His pure love with others. I know He lives and loves us. I know we will go farther and higher with His help.

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<sup>1</sup> Website: <https://oficinadelperegrino.com/en/statistics/> 2020

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Boyd K. Packer, "A Tribute to the Rank and File of the Church," *Ensign*, May 1980, 62.

<sup>3</sup> Oxford online dictionary: alone, atone

<sup>4</sup> Gerrit W. Gong, "Our Campfire of Faith," *Ensign*, November 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Brene Brown, "The Gifts of Imperfection," *Hazelden Publishing*, Minnesota, 2010, 56-57.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey R. Holland, "Be Ye Therefore Perfect—Eventually," *Ensign*, November 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Russell M. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," *Ensign*, November 1995.

<sup>8</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, HarperOne, 2001, 45-46.

<sup>9</sup> Neal A. Maxwell, "Notwithstanding My Weakness," *Ensign*, November 1976.

<sup>10</sup> Richard L. Evans, Conference Report, Oct. 1952, 95.

<sup>11</sup> John R. Rosenberg, "The Syntax of Creation," *Humanities at BYU*, Fall 2013, 2-3.

<sup>12</sup> Russell M. Nelson, "Joy and Spiritual Survival," *Ensign*, November 2016, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Dan Baker, *What Happy People Know*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2003, 71-76.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> Thomas S. Monson, "Guideposts for Life's Journey," *BYU Devotional*, November 13, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Living in a Fast-paced World," *Ensign*, June 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Wayment, "The New Testament: A Translation for Latter-Day Saints," *Religious Studies Center*, Brigham Young University, 2019, 307.

<sup>18</sup> Jean B. Bingham, "I Will Bring the Light of the Gospel into My Home," *Ensign*, November 2016.

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<sup>19</sup> Henry B. Eyring, “Feed My Lambs,” *Ensign*, November 1997.

<sup>20</sup> Codex Calixtinus, Dum Pater Familias hymn.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph B. Wirthlin, “The Great Commandment,” *Ensign*, November 2007.