

*“The Best Measure of True Greatness is How Christlike We Are”*

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On the wall just inside the door to my bedroom I have hung a photograph of our seven kids, taken decades ago when the whole raucous crew counted on me for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I catch a glimpse of that moment in time every time I enter the room, and it always makes me smile, both because that season was a demanding, treasured, fleeting one that sometimes seemed would never end, and because of the details of interaction revealed in the details of the photo.

Those kids are all dressed in pale pink and sky blue and professionally arranged to create the perfect visual composition. One adorable daughter is seated right in the middle with brothers and sisters behind her, on stools at her side, and on the floor at her feet. Undoubtedly aware of that trapped-in-the-middle predicament, she has grabbed her stool on either side and extended her arms to lift herself off that stool just a little to be sure that her head claims an altitude comparable to that of the older brothers and sisters at her side. Years after the photo was taken, she confessed to me that she was willing to tolerate the discomfort of hyperextended elbows to manage an altitude in that photo that qualified her for a presence.

Already that little girl felt that unfortunate, nearly universal tendency to measure herself against others and to think that she needed to take action to be adequate. She wasn’t sure she was tall enough unless she was as tall as the others.

Did your grandmother have a door jamb littered with pencil marks like my husband’s grandmother did? That darling woman used to invite her grandchildren to stand with their backs to that door jamb every time they came to visit. While they tried to gain a little extra altitude by fudging on their toes, she marked the door jamb to see how tall they were. Her desire was to recognize their personal growth, but my husband tells me that they were more often looking at how they measured up in comparison to their cousins than they were celebrating their own progress.

Taking stock of where we have been and where we are going is important for promoting forward and upward motion. But measuring can be a dangerous thing unless we are careful about what and whom we are measuring against. There is an element of comparison and maybe even competition implicit in measuring ourselves against others. If we assume that the scriptural injunction to be perfect means that we need to be better than someone else, we are likely to diminish our discipleship rather than enhance it. Seeking to be an ideal Mormon woman may not be as helpful a goal as seeking to be a worthy disciple of Christ. Using Christ as the measure is more helpful than comparing or competing with others. Additionally, being motivated by pleasing others is not as important as seeking to please God. President Ezra Taft Benson said, “The best measure of true greatness is how Christlike we are” (“A Sacred Responsibility,” *Ensign*, May 1986). When He is our measure, His rewards are the result of our progress, not feelings of being taller in any sense of the word than anyone else. And His rewards, the fruits of the Spirit, are the blessed, soul-satisfying results of our quest: peace, joy, and love, not status, importance, or superiority.

So, if we are seeking to be Christlike, what then was Christ like? Certainly His attributes are broad and marvelous and include absolutely everything good. For now, however, maybe we can consider a few of His innumerable notable characteristics in light of the two great commandments: loving the Lord our God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. That’s what He was like. That’s what He did perfectly.

Clearly the common denominator of that three-part injunction is love: love of God, love of others, love of self. All three of those types and focuses of heavenly-mandated love work together. If we would desire to love God more convincingly, we would accomplish that partly by loving each other and ourselves more generously. If our goal is to feel a greater love for someone we’re struggling to connect with, we might redouble our efforts to love God. And if we’re having a hard time feeling at home with ourselves, addressing each other with greater kindness and bolstering our determination to show our love of God by more diligently keeping His commandments will increase our personal confidence and help us feel better about ourselves. The relationship among those three loves is certain.

The negative implications of that intricate relationship are inevitable, too. For example, if we are casual or sloppy about demonstrating our love of the Lord and doing what He wants us to do, our love of self, or our confidence, will always suffer. If we are impatient or unforgiving with others, we will both feel uncomfortable with ourselves and with God. And if we are relentlessly hard on ourselves or unwilling to treat ourselves with kindness, we will likely be hard on others, too.

There is an important relationship between doing and being. Utilizing that relationship to change our hearts so that we will more ably love each other, ourselves, and the Lord, is powerful. At times it’s plain hard to love someone who seems difficult. On occasion, that person may even be our own child or husband. When that’s the case, I recommend the “as if” principle. If we treat that annoying person as if she or he were our best friend, our hearts will change. What we do on the outside will affect what’s going on inside. Because

of that inevitable relationship between doing and being, with time, we will always begin to feel charity toward that person.

The same is true when we aren't so sure we are crazy about ourselves. Sometimes we are the annoying person annoying ourselves! If we deliberately treat ourselves with patient kindness, we will begin to actually feel differently about ourselves. Did you know that it has been scientifically proven that if a person makes a decision to smile, regardless of whether or not she is happy, she will actually feel happier? Happiness or any other desirable characteristic can be affected from the outside in, as well as reflected from the inside out.

With regard to spiritual characteristics, we know that feelings of faith promote faithful behavior. That's the inside out part. And faithful behavior builds feelings of faith. That's the outside in part. So if we want to strengthen our faith, we might make a decision to behave in more faithful ways. And if we want to behave in more faithful ways, we might increase our commitment to the doctrine or increase our faith.

As we consider the three dimensions of love that are the hallmarks of Christlike behavior, let's begin with the third: loving ourselves. That third mandate appears in verses again and again in every volume of the scriptures. Not surprisingly, Christ offered the perfect example of what appropriate loving of self looks like.

First, He knew who He was and whose He was and neither aggrandized (as if that were possible) nor minimized His identity. We, on the other hand, have such a hard time recognizing and remembering who we are and what that divine identity implies. Let me share a silly joke that I think makes a point. Once there was an elderly, prominent man who entered a grocery store looking for a particular product. Accustomed to special treatment, he was dissatisfied with the ordinary level of attention he received. Angry, he stormed up to the young woman at the cash register in the front of the store and he protested, "Young lady, do you know who I am?" The busy young cashier promptly took her store microphone off its hook and nonchalantly broadcast to the store, "I have an old guy up here who doesn't know who he is."

Unlike that arrogant fellow, we, I fear, too often think too little of ourselves. We don't know who we are either, but our personal estimation of ourselves is less than the reality, not greater. I am convinced that personal confidence is an essential first step to generosity with others. After all, the injunction is to love our neighbors as ourselves, implying that we first love ourselves. The scripture suggests that measure almost as if loving ourselves were a given, but I fear that for many self-critical women, it is not. I hope that when we read, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (D&C 59:6), we hear a heavenly mandate to love ourselves ringing in our ears. The commandment to love others as ourselves would be inappropriate if our love of self were weak. We women too often may have an easier time loving others than we do ourselves. It might be a good idea for us to say to ourselves, "Thou shalt love thyself with as much generosity as you do your neighbor." Too often we apologize for ourselves and minimize our efforts, saying, "I'm just a mom or wife or visiting teacher," and we shy away from honest compliments and we resist

legitimate opportunities to acknowledge the approval of the Spirit. Clearly, in order to more successfully love others, we must first love ourselves.

President Joseph Fielding Smith told the story of a young man who was offered a job as an inspector that required him to visit unsavory places to collect taxes. The work was respectable, but the company was sketchy. That fellow's father wisely advised him to decline the offer, saying, "The best company is none too good for you." As daughters of divine parentage, the best is none too good for us either. We can rightfully live for and cultivate the best of associations, as well as the best of gifts and blessings. In spite of our imperfections, we have been sent from our Heavenly Father and King not to be satisfied by anything unsavory, but to be refined and ennobled in every way. Is it a false modesty that prevents our claiming with certainty that "the best is none too good for us?"

Maybe our inevitable errors thwart our ability to maintain a posture of confidence. A popular radio host in earlier years named Paul Harvey used to tell some captivating, seemingly tragic stories about people who struggled and failed. Just when he had our full sympathetic attention, he added the essential postscript. That critical, concluding piece inevitably turned the tale of sorrow into one of triumph. It was his trademark "the rest of the story," after which he concluded with his signature, "Good day."

We, too, are works in progress whose stories might understandably seem like tragedies if we stop short and neglect to bravely complete "the rest of the story." Others, even scriptural greats, have been works in progress, too.

Think of Peter, who in spite of his close association with Jesus, denied him three times. And think of Alma and the sons of Mosiah, who went about seeking to destroy the church of God. And think of Paul, whose very purpose was to persecute the saints. And think even of Adam and Eve, who were cast out of the Garden of Eden for their transgression. We know the blessed "rest of the stories" of each of those mighty disciples. We know that their stories didn't end with their errors but rather continued on to glorious conclusions. If any of them had stopped short, their place in the eternities might have been different, but they didn't. They are worthy heroes in spite of mortal errors. Picking ourselves up and pressing on with brightness of hope to complete the blessed "rest of our stories" turns potential tragedy into triumph. Patient, determined endurance is part of the fundamental doctrine of Christ. We can love ourselves and remain hopeful, in spite of imperfections.

That determination to see beyond the immediate imperfections in ourselves enables us to maintain hopeful confidence in our ability to turn a page and begin a new chapter. When we are more patient with ourselves, we are more likely to see others through a more generous lens of charity. As we see ourselves as worthy, able, would-be disciples of Christ seeking to acquire and develop His characteristics, we are better able to see others with the same eye for potential and link arms with them on our mutual quest. Appropriate self-love equips us to better love others. The goal is to love them in the way the Savior does: with a generous awareness of their divine parentage and a trusting confidence in their eternal potential.

An example of the way Christlike love for others looks in practice is illustrated by a story told in chapter 17 of Exodus. The Israelites were fighting with the Amalekites with their leader Moses directing the effort. Like we are today, those Israelites were united in battle against a fearsome enemy. Each of the Israelites had his own part to play in the drama. Moses, verse nine tells us, was obligated to stand at the top of the hill with the rod of God in his hand. When Moses held up his hand, the Israelites prevailed, but when his strength weakened, Amalek prevailed. Now here's where the lesson for us about the way we should love others begins. Aaron and Hur were there on that hill with Moses. They saw what happened when Moses got tired, and because of their love for him and their desire for a favorable outcome in that battle, they wanted to help. But the charge to hold up his hand with that rod in it was Moses' charge. In spite of their love for Moses and their desire to help, they couldn't and shouldn't take away his task. It was his. But they could help as supportive friends and fellowfighters. So what did they do? Verse 12 of chapter 17 of Exodus says, "They took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat thereon." And when that wasn't enough, they stood on either side of him and held up his hands, and it says, "His hands were steady until the going down of the sun."

We work alongside others who bear burdens that, like Moses' rod, are theirs to bear. We neither can nor should take those burdens away, but neither should we neglect to find ways to help them bear them. After all, that's what Christlike love does—it strengthens us to enable us to meet the demands of our lives. It doesn't take our burdens entirely away, but it invites us to yoke ourselves with the Savior and share His strength. That's the enabling power of grace.

Our determination to help begins with compassion. True compassion is not a skill but rather a Christlike quality of heart. The resulting behavior of that quality of heart is described in D&C 81:5 as a commandment to "succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees." Compassion involves feeling what another feels even though we don't have her life experience. It impels us to act in loving, lifting ways. And one of the marvelous, ironic results of lifting others is a lightened load for ourselves.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, "Looking for honest ways to lift one another would...be more beneficial to our own self-esteem [than criticizing], for we would see more good in ourselves. We would cease to be so critical of our [own] weaknesses and would find ways to allow our weaknesses to become strengths with God's help." Lifting others lifts us— that's the relationship among the three fundamental loves in action again.

Loving others as He did also involves allowing them to bear their burdens and find the solutions to their problems their own way. The Savior didn't and doesn't usurp anyone's agency to solve her problems for her and then claim all the credit. Remember when young David offered to fight the fearsome Philistine giant Goliath? Saul had little confidence in that boy and his faithful determination. Skeptical, Saul proceeded to outfit the young hero in heavy armor, thinking that David really needed to do it Saul's way. He had a hard time allowing David space to meet the demands of his battle in his own way.

Christlike charity obligates us to believe in the capacity of others and seek to promote their success with Christlike allowance for their exercise of agency.

I know personally what that kind of Christlike love that champions and encourages the empowered use of agency in others, looks and feels like. I didn't grow up in a home with the gospel, but I never felt disadvantaged because of the empowering shepherding of others. My dad was a marvelous, mighty, integrity-filled father who took us kids with him to the Presbyterian Church once annually for the Easter celebration. My pretty, gentle mom was a member of the LDS Church but never attended during the time I lived at home. My neighborhood, however, included wonderful, generous saints whose faithful goodness fairly spilled over to bless me and many others with welcome and example. I walked to Primary after school every Wednesday with my little pals beginning when I was very young, and then to the church at the end of our street on Sundays, where I always found a welcoming smile and a waiting bench. I knew I belonged. Because of the kind and broad embrace of those early, blessed shepherds, it never occurred to me that I was any kind of outsider. They included me as their own in their gospel conversations and at their family dinner tables. My faith took root and flourished as a result of their generous tutelage. When I married and began a family of my own, I knew through and through what the very best of an LDS home looked and felt like because I had been taking notes over the course of all those years that I had been welcomed into the living rooms and kitchens of the homes of my ward members and friends. Who was I, that little girl, after all? Really, "one of the least of these" (Matthew 25:40). Those marvelous people who offered me such love did so like Christ, for Christ, and ultimately even perhaps to Christ. "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these...ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

That energetic type of shepherding is described well in Ezekiel, chapter 34. First, the Lord reprimands those who fail to serve beyond the bounds of their personal needs and those of their exactly delineated flocks to bless those who are not specifically within their assigned boundaries. He says in verse two, "Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?" My ward members and the families of my friends exemplified shepherds who fed random little lambs like me in addition to themselves and their genetic charges. I am forever grateful that they were so generous with their nurture.

The Lord goes on to offer in the subsequent verses all kinds of active verbs to describe the type of shepherding that's the result of Christlike love. The verbs include, "strengthen," "bind up," "bring again," "seek," "search," "deliver," "bring them out," "gather," and "feed." Several of those injunctions are restated many times in the course of a handful of verses. Clearly the Lord is serious about our rolling up our shirtsleeves and actively going to work to seek, serve, and save others. That's what Christlike love of others requires.

When my husband was called to serve in Salt Lake City, we moved from our longtime California home and purchased, from my mother, the home I had grown up in as a little girl. Many of the marvelous saints who cared for me in that blessed neighborhood were

still there. They were a little grayer and even more Christlike than they had been decades earlier. Some time ago at a fast and testimony meeting in another ward, I listened to a grateful testimonial of Christlike love similar to that that had fed and blessed me. A tender young person, who had returned early from a mission, bravely stood and thanked with great emotion the many ward members who had generously extended a welcome home without judgment or reproof. I knew that the love that had served and sustained me all those years ago was alive and active. True Latter-day Saints all over the world are still serving as faithful shepherds, seeking and saving grateful little lambs like me who need Christlike love.

My favorite lyrics in all the hymnbook are found in the second verse of “In Humility, Our Savior” (*Hymns*, no. 172). As a request to heaven, they say, “Fill our hearts with sweet forgiving; Teach us tolerance and love.” Christlike love is a gift. We must plead for it, even as we do all in our power to live as if we are constantly the possessors of it.

The third aspect of the love referred to in the two great commandments is to love God with all our heart, mind, and strength. Sometimes we speak of loving God in a more general way as “the love of God,” or the love of Christ. I am fascinated by the linguistic ambiguity of that familiar phrase, “love of God.” Defensibly, love of God could be the love that He has for us, as in “God’s love for His children.” We reference that sense of the phrase when we say, “I see evidence of the love of God in my life.” It could also refer to a divine quality of love. That’s what we refer to when we say, “We must seek to love each other as God loves us.” Additionally, it might mean the love that we have for Him, as in, “Because I love God so dearly, I am seeking to do all that I do, motivated by that love I feel for God.” I suspect that it means all three.

“Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with all thy heart...might, mind, and strength” (Doctrine and Covenants 59:5). That every-fiber-of-our-being kind of love is active, willing, hardworking, humble, energetic, obedient, submissive, trusting, patient, longsuffering. It is best characterized by Jesus Christ’s willingness to serve as the Savior of all mankind. After Adam and Eve had partaken of the fruit and were to be cast out of the Garden of Eden, Jesus stepped forward to assume His foreordained role as our Redeemer. In Isaiah chapter six, verse eight, we read of the Savior’s willingness. In response to the voice of the Lord asking, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Jesus offered the response that should be the model for all of us who love God: “Here am I; send me.” The quality and quantity of Jesus’ love for both His Father and for us motivated Him to accept that responsibility that only He could assume. He meekly and modestly offered to unselfishly submit His will to His Father’s with all the implications of that sublime deference.

Other scriptural heroes have sought to follow that divine example of Christlike love with a “Here am I; send me” inclination. Think of Mary when she was visited by an angel telling her of the favor she had found with God, and her subsequent calling to bear the Savior of the world. Certainly without understanding all the details or implications of that calling, she responded with a “Here am I, send me” statement. She said, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38). And think of

the boy Samuel, who when he understood who was speaking to him in his dream, answered by saying, “Speak; for thy servant heareth” (1 Samuel 3:10). Samuel’s willingness to listen certainly also implied his willingness to obey what he was told.

There are modern-day disciples who behave in a “Here am I; send me” way, too. Think of missionaries of all ages who go to all kinds of unfamiliar places and eat all kinds of unfamiliar food and love all kinds of unfamiliar people because they have willingly stepped forward and said, “Here am I; send me.” I love the example of the little girl at the Sacramento Temple dedication who thrilled at the opportunity the prophet gave her to step forward to apply a bit of ceremonial mud to the cornerstone. Exultant, she exclaimed with her own version of the “send me” attitude, “The prophet invited me to help him fix the temple wall!”

Willingness to offer ourselves in service and to take initiative are essential aspects of that Christlike, “Here am I; send me” disposition. Years ago, in an attempt to teach our young children about that behavior, we staged an experiment. When no one was looking, we dumped a whole box of crunchy cereal in the hallway leading to the kitchen. One by one our children came home and walked down that hallway on their way to the refrigerator. Without even seeming to notice the mess, one child walked right through the crunchy pile undeterred, tracking bits of cereal as he went. Another saw the mess, and unwilling to slow his progress toward an after school snack, he simply walked around it. Two others came along later. They looked down at the giant spill and promptly called out in a loud voice as they kept walking, “Mom, there’s a big mess in the hall. You had better come and clean it up.” Another later arrival stopped briefly and hollered, “Yuck! Who made this big mess? Disgusting!” Then she hurried on. Only one daughter carefully detoured around the cereal to the broom closet. She took the dustpan and broom back to the problem and unceremoniously cleaned it up before she continued on to the kitchen.

Christlike love of God certainly begins with obedience to His commandments. We read in the scriptures the clear cause and effect directive, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Compliance with the commandments alone, however, is not the complete hallmark of true greatness. True greatness requires even more. It involves noticing, taking initiative, and doing more than is required. It implies a divine quality of heart, not just a series of check marks on a list of completed performances. That quality of Christlike love of God is referenced in a letter Paul wrote to Philemon in which he praised that early disciple by saying, “Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say” (Philemon 21). If Christlike love of God is the goal, then doing all and more than He has said, with modest gratitude for the privilege, reflects a heart full of that love.

“Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:37-39). As we seek true greatness, may we seek to be Christlike and to measure ourselves against that divine standard. May we consider the quantity and quality of our love for the Lord, our love for



each other, and our love for ourselves as the yardstick by which we measure our likeness to Christ, is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.