

Loving and Caring for Each Other

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My mother taught me many good things. I count among them how to iron my own clothes, darn my own socks, and how to quilt. She also taught me that the dishes are not finished until the kitchen stove is clean. These have been blessings. She also taught me some important spiritual things. Much of this teaching occurred during what seemed like long days spent with her as a preschooler and later as a child. I remember vividly how my preschool mind whirled a bit and the feeling of “nausea,” or existential angst, that swept over me when she taught me that after death we live forever—that time has no end in the eternities. When I think about eternity just right, I can feel that same feeling in my stomach—a nostalgic feeling. One thing my mother taught has had a bit of a haunting feeling to it over the years whenever I remember how cheerfully, after telling me how important it was to behave myself as I should, she recited the words, “Of all sad words of tongue or pen, / The saddest are these: ‘It might have been!’ ”¹

I could not have been more than six or seven when I had another conversation with my mother that has stayed with me ever since and which bears directly on the topic of loving and caring for each other. I remember the conversation about love and marriage and having a family. I think I must have asked something like, “How do you know when you really love some one?” Her answer was simple and to the point. “When you love someone you care more about them than you do yourself; their happiness is more important to you than your own happiness.” Her words might have been slightly more simple, but they found their way indelibly into my memory and into my heart. Suddenly my own mother's love for me—which I had accepted as fact, but little understood—took on a whole new luster. I know I took this principle to heart because, not very much later, I was smitten in an unmistakable way by a little girl in my third-grade class while watching her perform as a dancing Christmas cookie. One might say that I plucked her right out of the third-grade chorus line. But the feeling was not just that she was cute, it was that she was GOOD—through and through. In spite of the fact that that relationship did not mature, I have always remembered what it felt like to know that someone was good—through and through—and to know that her happiness and welfare was more important to me than my own. Within the limits of my own rough edges and imperfections, I can recommend this principle to all as the

foundation of a loving and caring marriage. I believe that Sister Williams and I can attest to the benefit of this principle from the perspective of our own relationship. I offer it here as an important foundation for a marriage in which loving and caring for each other can flourish.

President Hinckley declared: “Selfishness is a destructive, gnawing, corrosive element in the lives of most of us. It lies at the root of much of the tension between parents and children.”²

He also noted: “I am satisfied that a happy marriage is not so much a matter of romance as it is an anxious concern for the comfort and well-being of one’s companion. Selfishness so often is the basis of money problems. . . . Selfishness is at the root of adultery, the breaking of solemn and sacred covenants. . . . Selfishness is the antithesis of love.”³

Among the corrosive fruits of selfishness, one of the most common—and perhaps the purest manifestation—is anger, in all its forms. To become angry, by its very nature, is to accuse another of a wrong—imagined or real.⁴ It is the ultimate act of self-assertion in a relationship. By its nature it demands that the other take account of and grant the legitimacy of the angry person’s desires and judgments. Anger can turn an act of principled assertiveness into an act of dominance and aggression. In a relationship of loving and caring, one must simply live without anger.

The scriptures warn us against anger and the source of anger: “The devil will grasp them with his everlasting chains, and they be stirred up to anger, and perish; for behold, at that day shall he rage in the hearts of the children of men, and stir them up to anger against that which is good.”⁵

Notice the interesting contrast Mormon captures in his description of the righteous Nephites after the visit of the Savior: “And it came to pass that there was no contention among all the people, in all the land; but there were mighty miracles wrought among the disciples of Jesus.”⁶ Mormon also teaches us the reason for the lack of contention: “And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people.”⁷

It is no wonder, then, that when the Savior appeared to the Nephites at the temple mount in Bountiful, His first proclamation of His gospel was prefaced by a caution about the spirit of contention: “For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.

“Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger one against another; but this is my doctrine that such things should be done away.

“Behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, I will declare unto you my doctrine.”⁸

By this reading, the spirit of contention—the presence of anger—is inimical to the doctrine Christ came to teach. It prevents our being sensitive to the spirit of the gospel. By extension, a spirit of selfishness will interfere with a gospel-centered marriage and the loving and caring that are inherent to such a relationship.

President David O. McKay spoke of the effect of selfishness on a marriage: “Marriage is a relationship that cannot survive selfishness, impatience, domineering, inequality, and lack of respect.”⁹

He was not timid about setting the standard for a marriage very high: “No member of this Church, no husband or father, has the right to utter an oath in his own home, or ever to express a cross word to his wife or to his children. . . . You do what you can to produce peace and harmony, no matter what you suffer.”¹⁰

President McKay also said: “God help us to build homes in which the spirit of heaven on earth may be experienced. You and I know that this is possible, it is not a dream, it is not a theory. . . . We can have homes in which children will *never* hear father and mother wrangle or quarrel.”¹¹

President Brigham Young articulated a similarly high standard: “In our daily pursuits in life, of whatever nature and kind, Latter-day Saints . . . should maintain a uniform and even temper, both when at home and when abroad. They should not suffer reverses and unpleasant circumstances to sour their natures and render them fretful and unsocial at home, speaking words full of bitterness and biting acrimony to their wives and children, creating gloom and sorrow in their habitations, making themselves feared rather than loved by their families. Anger should *never* be permitted to rise in our bosoms, and words suggested by angry feelings should never be permitted to pass our lips.”¹²

And finally, President Young said: “Let us live so that the spirit of our religion will live within us, then we have peace, joy, happiness and contentment, which makes such pleasant fathers, pleasant mothers, pleasant children, pleasant households, neighbors, communities and cities. That is worth living for, and I do think that the Latter-day Saints ought to strive for this.”¹³

One might conclude at this point that the foregoing is all well and good. We all know this. But to say it doesn’t make it any more realistic, nor any easier to do. It’s a pretty easy thing to preach a sermon against anger and its attendant vices—everyone can agree with you, and feel good about it. It is quite another thing to offer something that will actually help to put a stop to it. The devil, as they say, is in the details.

In the spirit of offering some insights that might be of practical use, I will share some perspectives that have been helpful to me in trying to live, personally and in my marriage relationship, a life that fosters and supports loving and caring. I offer these as perspectives that can counter the selfishness that so clearly and completely threatens loving and caring relationships. I offer these as perspectives, in a spirit I take to be congenial to what Elder Boyd K. Packer has taught: “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior.”¹⁴

While I do not offer these perspectives as doctrine, I hope they might provide some insight capable of moving us toward a clearer understanding of our nature and our relationships. In the end, I hope they might be useful in attaining and maintaining loving and caring marriage relationships.

The Perspective of Charity

I find in Elder Packer's teaching about the beneficial effects of understanding doctrine an echo of the teaching of Alma to the faithful people of Gideon. Near the end of his sermon, he summarizes: "And see that ye have faith, hope, and charity, and then ye will always abound in good works."¹⁵ If I take Alma at his word, the real key to good behavior and righteous living is to have faith, hope, and charity. If we abound in faith, hope, and charity, we will abound in love and caring. When understood from a foundation of charity, certainly most, if not all, interpersonal problems in a marriage will be soluble, and, importantly, we will be able to see them as soluble. People possessed of charity¹⁶—which is the pure love of Christ, manifest in the laying down of His life for each of us¹⁷—will certainly be in a position to see their spouses as the children of God and as the redeemed of our Savior. Lesser concerns in a relationship will often fade into obscurity. The same change of heart experienced by the people of King Benjamin when they understood the redeeming love of Jesus Christ,¹⁸ by which they lost all disposition toward evil, has the power to produce marriages characterized by love and caring.

Of course, the mere act of seeing a spouse as a child of God and as redeemed of the Savior may not necessarily result in a change of heart or a change of the behavior of a spouse bent on anger, abuse, and selfishness. But, seeing through the lens of charity may bring about greater love and caring in a relationship not already eroded by some "grosser crime."¹⁹ And even in such deeply eroded relationships, charity can bring an eternal perspective that can provide a measure of peace and understanding, allowing one to perform, in love and quiet confidence, acts that might otherwise arise from and reflect bitterness and revenge.

Operating from a Position of Weakness—and Gladly

One piece of advice, commonly offered in our contemporary culture, is that we should always try to operate in our lives from a position of strength. While in some senses and some settings this is sound advice, I want to suggest here how it might enhance our capacity for loving and caring if we operate from what we might refer to as a position of weakness. Let me suggest two quite fundamental ways of thinking about our basic human condition that can have quite different and quite profound influences on our relationships and our ability to love and care for each other.

One way to think of ourselves in this mortal state is as being born into a world of scarcity with needs. Indeed, some theories of human nature view us as largely, if not entirely, a teeming bundle of needs. In this view the satisfaction of needs becomes the prime directive and the underlying motive of all behavior. If this is our understanding, then other people, deliberately or not, are inevitably understood as among the array of things in life that have the potential for meeting our needs. However else we may relate to them we can never stray too far from a consideration of the fulfillment of our needs. And, in a world of scarcity, potential for obtaining things that fulfill needs is an important and salient issue. I believe Korihor, the anti-Christ, reasonably concluded that, in such a world, we all fare "according to the management of the creature . . . [and prosper] according to [our] genius, and . . . [conquer] according to [our] strength; and whatsoever a man [does] is no crime."²⁰ In such a system, it is quite alright to "look up with boldness, and . . . enjoy [our] rights and privileges."²¹ In such a world, however, loving

and caring become difficult prospects and hardly escape the attenuating influence of selfishness.

The alternative way of thinking of ourselves is as being born into a world of relative sufficiency²² and being born with weakness as described in the book of Ether in the Book of Mormon: “If men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.”²³

Putting aside the all too real facts that there are many people in the world in genuine need of the means to sustain life and that there is scarcity in too many parts of the world, I want to concentrate on “needs” and “weakness,” “scarcity,” and “sufficiency” in their broader metaphorical sense and speak about the implications for our marriages and other relationships of looking at ourselves as fundamentally possessed of needs to be fulfilled, or, alternatively, of looking at ourselves as fundamentally possessed of weakness to be overcome. Which way we understand ourselves will have a profound effect on how we look at others and how we experience our relationships.

If we see ourselves fundamentally as having needs, we will likely evaluate our relationships on the basis of how well they fulfill our needs. We will evaluate other people as relatively satisfactory or unsatisfactory sources of fulfillment of our needs. This orientation is predisposed to produce selfishness. It will view relationships as negotiations and destroy genuine intimacy, because intimacy requires that people be seen as ends in themselves rather than means to other ends, such as the satisfaction of our needs.

If, on the other hand, we see ourselves fundamentally as having weakness and see the concomitant obligation to overcome our weaknesses as a fundamental moral purpose of our mortal experience, then we will likely view our relationships as potential sources of strength— aids to our progress toward moral perfection. We will see other people as sources of help in becoming better people. This orientation will foster humility and selflessness. A crucial purpose for relationships is mutual strengthening, and in a good relationship each party is a better person than he or she would be without the relationship. Genuine intimacy is possible because we do not see each other as means to the satisfaction of our private needs. Rather, we feel gratitude for the other for mutual strength and support. In this kind of relationship, loving and caring can flourish. Loving and caring are understood both as the means of growth and development and the end toward which relationships should take us. Desires²⁴ are perfected in loving and caring relationships, while at the same time, loving and caring relationships flow naturally from the perfecting of desire.

Repentance as Loving and Caring

There are two different ways we can think about and understand the process of spiritual progress and development of virtues. The first way of thinking is that virtues (such as loving and caring) are gained by a process (sometimes long, laborious, and difficult) of acquisition in which virtues are built up through practice and hard work. This is undoubtedly true in some cases and for some purposes, and we all should be anxiously engaged in developing good habits. However, there is

also another way of thinking about the process of moral perfection that is a primary purpose of earth life. Consider the possibility that virtues are acquired and spiritual progress achieved by our ceasing to do those things that interfere with virtue and perfection. In other words, we stop sinning. We can understand virtue and perfection as the core left over when the mantle of sins and falsity, which is an inevitable part of our mortal heritage, is stripped away. In other words, virtue and perfection is what we are left with when we cease to sin.

This possible understanding of the process of acquiring virtue and moving toward perfection makes it clear why repentance occupies such a central position in the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the same time it illustrates for us the consummate importance of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. His role as Savior and Redeemer is central and essential to the acquisition of all moral virtue, to our temporal and eternal progress, and to the success of “the great plan of happiness.”²⁵ Seen in this way, then, repentance is a crucial means of perfecting our relationships, allowing us to love and care for each other unrestrained by the bonds of sin and selfishness. According to this way of understanding, love and caring will result when we cease to do those things that interfere with our doing so—in other words, when we cease to sin. Repentance, virtue, atonement, grace, and charity thus come together in loving and caring relationships.

Living and Caring as Fruit

Like many of the most important things in life, loving and caring, and a successful ennobling marriage, are in some important ways by-products of a particular way of living—what might be called the living “after the manner of happiness.”²⁶ This is nothing more nor less than living in the way prescribed by the gospel and the example of Jesus Christ. King Benjamin described both the process and the fruits of this way of life:

“As ye have come to the knowledge of the glory of God, or if ye have known of his goodness and have tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your sins, which causeth such exceedingly great joy in your souls, even so I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, . . . and humble yourselves . . . , calling upon the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come. . . .

“. . . If ye do this ye shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God. . . .

“And ye will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably. . . .

“And ye will not suffer your children [and this applies to husbands and wives as well] that they . . . transgress the laws of God, and fight and quarrel one with another and serve the devil. . . .

“But ye will teach them [and each other] to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them [and each other] to love one another, and to serve one another.”²⁷

Loving and caring for each other are fruits of the Spirit, like the other fruits of the Spirit described in scripture: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.”²⁸

As fruits of a life lived together under covenant, enlightened and blessed by the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and sanctified by His Atonement, loving and caring marriage relationships will flow quite naturally and “without compulsory means”²⁹ as we allow the influence of the Holy Ghost into our lives and allow ourselves to become “new creatures”³⁰ and receive “new heart[s].”³¹

May we live so as to enjoy the fruit of the love of God³² in loving and caring relationships so that marriage relationships and family life will be what they are intended to be—now and through eternity.

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