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We Are to Love God and Our Neighbors

H. Reese Hansen

I appreciated the opening prayer offered by Matt Jensen. I'm going to let you in on a little secret—Matt had a special reason this morning to pray for the Spirit to be here today. You see, Matt did much of the research for my remarks. And so he is really hoping that this will go well. A couple of days ago, I asked Vice President Jim Gordon for some advice on giving this talk. This morning as I came into the Marriott Center, he handed me this folded note on which he had provided important advice. On the front of the note, as you can see if you are close enough, is written one word: *Socrates*. When I opened the note I read his sound counsel: “Socrates gave long speeches. Socrates was poisoned by his friends.”

I will try not to overstay my welcome at the podium today, although I will admit that the attorney in me regrets there is no one to whom I can bill this time!

I feel a burden of responsibility this morning to speak of things that will be useful to you. I am aware that this is the last devotional of the semester. By now many students are in the beginning stages of the awful realization that there is more to be done than can possibly be accomplished by the end of the semester. So I understand that you may be a bit distracted just now. But for the next few minutes I hope we can focus together on our Savior; on his profound love for, and unfailing patience with, each one of us; and on how his teachings and example of love should guide our individual lives.

Whenever I think of the Savior, I think of the scripture recorded in the Gospel of John:

As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. . . .

These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.

This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. [John 15:9–13]

The promise of this commandment is that by loving others our joy might be full. What a profound insight. When you truly love another person, both you and the loved one are blessed.

Actually, we know from our own experience that this promise is a reality.

Loving others, then, is much, much more than a suggestion. It is not given to us as an option. The heart and soul of the gospel of Jesus Christ is love—love of God and love of mankind. I worry that we treat this commandment as one of those that must have been meant for someone else to heed—someone, for example, like an enemy.

The well-known commandment to love one another speaks to and challenges all of us. And it is learning to love—both God and one another—that ought to take the central place in our efforts to follow the Savior. Those who would truly follow Christ must learn to love in the way Christ intended us to love. “By this,” he said, “shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35).

It is through learning to love others that we not only keep the commandment but build the foundation upon which obedience to every other of God’s commandments is fundamentally rooted, and love is the cornerstone around which every other virtue in our lives is built.

It is a relatively easy thing, of course, to love those who love us, who are kind to us, and who are like us. This familiar scripture teaches that the commandment to love one another comes with no such limitation: “For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?” (Matthew 5:46).

Elder David B. Haight taught:

Besides loving God, we are commanded to do what to many is a more difficult commandment—to love all, even enemies, and to go beyond the barriers of race or class or family relationships. . . .

[A]re we not commanded to cultivate genuine fellowship and even a kinship with every human being on earth? Whom would you bar from your circle? We might deny ourselves a nearness to our Savior because of our prejudices of neighborhood or possessions or race—attitudes that Christ would surely condemn. Love has no boundary, no limitation of good will. [“Love All,” *Ensign*, November 1982, 10–11]

God does not love us because we are particularly lovable; he does not love us only if we keep his commandments; he does not love us because we are just like him. Our Father in Heaven loves us in spite of our weaknesses, our sins, and our failures to be kind to one another. In spite of who we are or what we have done, I believe that for our Heavenly Father, even those among us who are viewed as unlovable are loved by him. God wants to pour out his love on us. And in fact he has done so by providing for us the Savior, whose ultimate sacrifice made possible the opportunity for every person to return to the celestial home and to be with him for all eternity: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Having a Christlike love requires more than a pleasant response to those who enter into our lives. God’s love requires reaching out to others and enfolding them in our hearts and lives.

Mother Teresa, the Catholic nun who has spent her life in the slums of Calcutta helping the poorest of the poor—the lepers and abandoned children—said, “Love each other with a clean heart. . . . [The poor] are not hungry for bread; they are hungry for love” (“Grads Hear Noted Nun,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 31 May 1982, A-4, quoted in Haight, “Love All,” 12).

I recently learned of a student at BYU who came to Provo from an eastern European country to work on a second graduate degree. He had been a student at one of the most prestigious universities in Europe. That university had provided a scholarship to cover his costs while he studied here. But he was not like a typical BYU student. He dressed somewhat differently—at least by our standards. He is not a member of the Church. He speaks fluent and beautiful English with a discernible accent that our linguists could trace to his home country. Two weeks ago this student was asked by a fellow student how he felt about his stay at BYU.

He said, “For the most part, I have hated it! For the entire three months of my stay I have been lonely. I have felt depressed and homesick—like a loner. I have made no friends.”

How can this be? I wondered. Especially here at BYU, where we are committed followers of the Savior. A majority of us have experienced living in other lands and know the loneliness one can feel in that situation. I wondered what could have been done to make his stay here more enjoyable. I wondered, too, what report he will give about BYU, our church, and our lifestyle when he returns to his homeland. I admit that I wondered if any classmate had done anything to make him feel accepted, valued, and loved. I wondered how many of us who had come into contact with this student from a foreign land had remembered the Savior’s direction:

But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. [Leviticus 19:34]

Living with godlike love demands that we come to really feel that all people are within our circle of loved ones and that we feel a responsibility toward them.

This principle was taught by the Savior in an excellent example of the Socratic teaching method in common use in law schools today. A certain lawyer asked the Savior what he should do to inherit eternal life. The Savior answered with a question:

What is written in the law? how readest thou?

And he [the lawyer] answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.

And he [Jesus] said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. [Luke 10:25–28]

The follow-up question from the lawyer was, “And who is my neighbor?” (v. 29).

The Savior responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritans were looked down upon by the Jews. The priest and the Levite—both of whom were Jews—should have come to the aid of the unfortunate man but did not. It was the despised Samaritan who braved the social barriers of that day and showed when he cared for the stricken man the love Christ was expecting. After telling the story, Christ then gave this command: “Go, and do thou likewise” (Luke 10:37).

I fear there are too many among us whose behaviors toward others reveal that, in their own way, they (like the lawyer in Jesus’s day) are still asking: “Who is my neighbor?” A good lawyer would object to a witness being asked the same question again and again in a trial by saying, “Asked and answered.” Indeed, the question has been asked and answered. But, unfortunately, even some members of the Church who clearly ought to know better have not incorporated this important teaching into their personal, everyday lives.

As in Christ’s time, the message of the gospel is there for all people. Despite the passage of centuries the gospel message has not changed. It was offered then, just like it is now, to anyone who was willing to listen. As the apostle Peter said, “I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him” (Acts 10:34–35).

This statement by Peter is the essence of the gospel we preach and ought to live—namely, the inclusion of all people. The teachings and blessings of Christ are not limited to certain groups or nationalities.

Despite this regular declaration of our beliefs, the Church and its members are too often criticized for their overall intolerance of other faiths, or lifestyles, and an attitude of exclusion and superiority. In a 1992 press release the Church acknowledged its concern over this matter. The statement said:

We reaffirm the longstanding concern of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for the well-being and intrinsic worth of all people. Latter-day Saints believe that “God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.” (Acts 10:34–35.)

All men and women are children of God. It is morally wrong for any person or group to deny anyone his or her inalienable dignity on the tragic and abhorrent theory of racial or cultural superiority.

We call upon all people everywhere to recommit themselves to the time-honored ideals of tolerance and mutual respect. We sincerely believe that as we acknowledge one another with consideration and compassion we will discover that we can all peacefully coexist despite our deepest differences. [“Church Exhorts Ethnic, Religious Tolerance,” *Church News*, 24 October 1992, 4]

Our obligation to love requires us to distinguish the sin from the sinner and to love all men. Jesus made this clear when he taught the Nephites after his resurrection:

Nevertheless, ye shall not cast him out of your synagogues, or your places of worship, for unto such shall ye continue to minister; for ye know not but what they will return and repent, and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them; and ye shall be the means of bringing salvation unto them. [3 Nephi 18:32]

I remember vividly, even today, a scene I witnessed nearly 20 years ago in the foyer of the church where I was the bishop. In those days we had a large group of young adults in the ward. This was before our resident stakes had single-adult wards. It was a Sunday before sacrament meeting. A dozen or so of our young adults were gathered in the foyer visiting about an outing they had scheduled for the following week. Their enthusiasm for the event was evident from the animated way they were talking about their plans. Everyone was deeply involved in the discussion. Then a young woman, about the age of those in the group, came rather timidly into the foyer. Although a member of the ward, she was not a regular attendee—in fact, she rarely came. She was not blessed with gifts and graces that made her fit easily anywhere. Most of the time she seemed hostile and unpleasant. Although she was known to the group, she had no friends. She lived a lifestyle that was different and, in many respects, contrary to the commandments. And everyone knew it—or thought they knew it. Then it happened. One of the young men, who was a natural and charismatic leader, saw her come in. He excused himself from the group, walked over to the

young lady, put an arm around her, and exclaimed how glad he was to see her. Would she sit with him in the meeting, and would she go with the group on their exciting excursion that week? She replied yes, and yes. A new friendship was begun. It would have been easy—even natural—for him to ignore her or to offer only a polite nod or hello. But he did what all of us should do. He extended himself to her in an offering of friendship.

Elder David B. Haight observed the truth that “God accomplishes His purposes heart to heart” (“Love All,” 12).

Unfortunately, feelings of loneliness are not peculiar to the young man from eastern Europe I spoke of, nor are feelings of alienation limited to an occasional person like the young woman in my ward who just didn’t fit in. Campus Church leaders are constantly trying to help students who are depressed, homesick, or lonely. Here, among us, there should be welcome for everyone.

The message of the Messiah was a message of inclusion. There should be no reason for people here to feel left out, lonely, unappreciated, or unloved.

In one of his first public statements after becoming the prophet and president of the Church, President Howard W. Hunter said:

I would invite all members of the Church to live with ever more attention to the life and example of the Lord Jesus Christ, especially the love and hope and compassion He displayed.

I pray that we might treat each other with more kindness, more courtesy, more humility and patience and forgiveness. [Press conference of 6 June 1994, in Jay M. Todd, “President Howard W. Hunter,” *Ensign*, July 1994, 4]

What a powerful invitation—and reminder! About two weeks ago, our third son, who recently moved to Chicago for employment, was diagnosed with a serious illness. Although he is doing well now, and the prognosis is good, I can tell you that the distance between Chicago and Provo never seemed so great as it did in those first several days while our family came to grips with the reality and implications of this unwelcome situation. This event reminded me forcefully of the common experience of all people who have loved ones in distant places. I dare to speculate that every person here at some time, now or in the past, has or has had a loved one in special need. It might be a concern about health or family or perhaps about one who is not being faithful to covenants and is wandering from the gospel. It might be a brother or sister, a parent or child or other loved one somewhere in the Church—perhaps in the East or in a western state—for whom you have prayed that kind of pleading prayer that seeks for a miraculous intervention or for special attention from someone. And we pray that a roommate, priesthood leader, home teacher, visiting teacher, or neighbor—or anyone there where our loved one is—will see in them the nobility and worth that we see. We pray that there is someone who

will care enough to love them with a special attentive and healing love. I'm confident most of you have had such an experience.

And just as you pray or have prayed for your loved one somewhere in the Church today, a parent or brother or sister or child prays that their loved one who lives here among us will be recognized for the potential and nobility that they possess. They pray that someone here will love them and assist in a gentle way to nurture the Spirit of our Heavenly Father in their loved one's life. My dear brothers and sisters, I believe that you and I have got to try harder to be the answers to the prayers of thousands of parents that their son or daughter, who is away from home and is here among us, will be accepted, looked out for, and loved.

Yes, we are our brother's keeper. We have been called to love all of God's children. Let us pledge anew our commitment to our Savior and to his flock. Let us help our Heavenly Father by being the instrument through which the prayers for loved ones are answered.

Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God;

For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him. [D&C 18:10-11]

There are three principle elements that need to find places in our hearts and in our acts if we are to become successful in loving others with a Christlike love. These three keys, if learned and applied, will open the door to your heart and to the hearts of others. They are not new. They are found in the familiar words of our Savior, whose love was a perfect love. The three keys are: *judge not*, *forgive freely*, and *serve generously*.

First, *judge not*. Because you and I can never really know all there is to know of others' life experiences and circumstances, and because we do not have a perfect scale of judgment with which to weigh others' acts, habits, reactions, or behavior, it is inappropriate for us to make judgments about others. It is impossible for any person who has faults to presume to be in a position to judge others. The Savior taught this lesson many times—once in the familiar account of the woman taken in adultery: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (John 8:7).

A second teaching of this principle is given in the Sermon on the Mount.

For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? [Matthew 7:2-3]

I can't resist telling a story many of you will quickly be able to relate to, which perhaps helps make the point. It seems a son was not measuring up to his father's expectations for him. There were the constant problems

of the messy bedroom, too much television, and not enough study being done. The son's grades were not as good as the father wanted them to be. And besides, household chores were often undone or poorly done. The father was disappointed, and, of course—like most of us—he wanted to deliver the kind of message to his son that would *make* him change. Finally, in exasperation the father said, “Son, do you have any idea what Abraham Lincoln was doing at your age?”

The son thought for only a moment and then replied, “No, Dad, I don't know what Abraham Lincoln was doing at my age, but I do know what he was doing at your age.”

Another reason why we should not judge others, I believe, is because many of the differences among people are the result of the fact that our Heavenly Father did not equip us equally with gifts and graces before sending us off to our earth life.

In the Doctrine and Covenants we are told:

For all have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God.

To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be profited thereby. [D&C 46:11–12]

It is well for each of us to remember this scripture. It clearly teaches that Heavenly Father intentionally made us individually unique so that *all* could be blessed by *each*. That we are each different in our abilities and interests and development obviously cannot justify a determination that one is superior or inferior to another. That we are different, but neither superior nor inferior, tells us something about the way we ought to appreciate each other. The fact is, it is precisely because we *are* each different that there is so much that is good and interesting and wonderful about others for us to discover and then to appreciate and eventually become personally enriched and blessed. If we do not seek to learn from others, we are missing much that is good and wonderful.

When I set apart a missionary, especially those going to foreign lands or into different cultures and races, often I am moved to advise the missionary that he or she is going on a mission to learn as well as to teach. By learning about the culture, history, and ways of the people the missionary meets, the missionary will be richly blessed personally and will come to love the people more quickly and more completely—and the Spirit will then be more likely to be received by those the missionary comes into contact with.

Learning to appreciate rather than judge others, especially those who are different from ourselves, is often difficult because of a tendency in many of us to believe that our ways are the “right” ways. Because of a perceived advantage of gender, race, culture, religion, education, physical

stature, appearance, or mental quickness, we may feel we are superior to others.

That some people have a perception of their superiority over others reminds me of the children's story of *The Sneetches*, written by Dr. Seuss. You may recall the simple story of the Star-Belly Sneetches who, because of the stars on their bellies, felt far superior to those who did not carry this obvious mark of distinction. In Dr. Seuss's words:

Because they had stars, all the Star-Belly Sneetches
 Would brag, "We're the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches."
 With their snoots in the air, they would sniff and they'd snort
 "We'll have nothing to do with the Plain-Belly sort!"
 And whenever they met some, when they were out walking,
 They'd hike right on past them without even talking.

Such treatment, as you can imagine, was not enjoyed by those with plain bellies. After hearing about the plight of the Plain-Belly bunch, Sylvester McMonkey McBean, the so-called "Fix-it-Up Chappie," came into town with a machine that would give Plain-Belly Sneetches a star upon their stomachs. Of course this did not sit well with those who had previously enjoyed having the exclusive star. In fact, this same businessman, after giving everyone a star, began to operate a machine that would remove stars, thus maintaining the shallow distinction. It was not too long before it was impossible to tell if a Sneetch had been star-bellied or plain-bellied to begin with. At this point the two groups could no longer afford to continue their attempt to keep themselves separated from the others. In addition, a change began to come over them. In fact, they realized how ridiculous their actions had been. Again using the words of Dr. Seuss:

I'm quite happy to say
 That the Sneetches got really quite smart on that day,
 The day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches
 And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches.
 That day, all the Sneetches forgot about stars
 And whether they had one, or not, upon thars.
 [Dr. Seuss, *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1961),
 2–25]

This story has a message for each of us. As we come to BYU from all over the world, we each bring our own stars or items we think are "in vogue" or somehow especially desirable. This is fine, but we must remember that our roommates, classmates, and every other person has his or her own stars as well. I hope each of us will learn to look past the external characteristics that so often are used to justify our classification of people. In other words, we need to take the time to get to know some plain-bellied types. As you become more loving and tolerant of others, your circle of friends will grow, you will expand your horizon, and you will change your

perspective of the world along the way. You will be greatly blessed, and so will your new friends.

There is a passage in the Book of Mormon, in 3 Nephi, that I want to draw special attention to this morning because I have felt particularly vulnerable to the warning taught in the account. Within a few years after the Savior's birth, all of the people living among the Nephites, which included many Lamanites, came to know that Christ had come. They repented of their sins, preached the gospel to the prisoners they had taken in the war against the Gadianton robbers, and set free those prisoners who covenanted to keep the peace. The Nephite leaders, Gidgiddoni and Lachoneus, had brought great peace in the land. The scripture tells us, "There was nothing in all the land to hinder the people from prospering continually, except they should fall into transgression" (3 Nephi 6:5). And they did prosper. But within a very short time "there began to be some disputings among the people" (3 Nephi 6:10).

And the people began to be distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their *chances for learning*; yea, some were ignorant because of their poverty, and others did receive great learning because of their riches. [3 Nephi 6:12; emphasis added]

I believe this account is a warning to those of us who have been blessed to have received an education. We ought never to suppose that our "learning" entitles us to special rank or privilege.

The second key to learning to live with Christlike love is to *forgive freely*. The principle of forgiveness and its relation to love was clearly taught by the Savior in the familiar passages from the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew. I suggest you take a close look at the sermon again and consider how much of it is devoted to teaching about the principle of forgiveness. Ask yourself why this is so. My estimate is that nearly one-half of that great sermon speaks of some element of forgiveness.

[R]esist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.

And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also.

And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. . . .

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. [Matthew 5:39-41, 43-44]

Peter asked the Savior how often he should forgive one who sinned against him: "Till seven times?"

The Savior replied: "I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21-22).

Learning to forgive those who have offended or in some manner caused injury may be the most important key to living with real Christlike love: “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

The final key is to *serve generously*. I believe we learn best to love by serving. C. S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, provides an insight to this key:

Do not waste time bothering whether you “love” your neighbour; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less. . . . But whenever we do good to another self, just because it is a self, made (like us) by God, and desiring its own happiness as we desire ours, we shall have learned to love it a little more or, at least, to dislike it less. [C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1952), 116–17]

Any returned missionary can testify that their love for the people they worked with on their mission was primarily the product of serving them. Elder Marvin J. Ashton taught, “What we serve we learn to love” (“We Serve That Which We Love,” *Ensign*, May 1981, 24). And to quote once again from Elder David B. Haight:

Love is a gift of God, and as we obey His laws and genuinely learn to serve others, we develop God’s love in our lives. . . .

Someone has written, “Love is a verb.” It requires doing—not just saying and thinking. The test is in what one does, how one acts, for love is conveyed in word and deed. [“Love All,” 12]

I will conclude with the profound teachings of the prophets Moroni and Mormon:

And again, behold I say unto you that he cannot have faith and hope, save he shall be meek, and lowly of heart.

If so, his faith and hope is vain, for none is acceptable before God, save the meek and lowly in heart; and if a man be meek and lowly in heart, and confesses by the power of the Holy Ghost that Jesus is the Christ, he must needs have charity; for if he have not charity he is nothing; wherefore he must needs have charity.

And charity suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, if ye have not charity, ye are nothing, for charity never faileth. Wherefore, cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all, for all things must fail—

But charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him.

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure. [Moroni 7:43–48]

From Christlike love comes all that is good. With it every commandment becomes easier to live and our lives become enriched by the abundance of others who teach and influence us. Only love will bring peace to the earth. I testify that as we learn to judge not, to forgive freely, and to serve generously, we will become more tolerant, and eventually we will come to have the gift of charity bestowed upon us by our Heavenly Father. That we may so do is my prayer in the holy name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

This devotional address was given to the BYU student body on April 8, 1997. Reprinted from the Clark Memorandum, fall 1997, 15–21; also printed in Brigham Young University Speeches, 1996–1997, 219–227.

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