

Children of Heavenly Father

M. RUSSELL BALLARD

My dear students and young friends, some of you may know that my wife, Barbara, and I have forty-three grandchildren and ninety-five great-grandchildren, many of whom are your age. I hear a lot of interesting things from my grandchildren and other young adults like you.

After listening to your insights, concerns, and worries, there are three very important things I want you to always remember. If you remember nothing else from what I say today, please remember these truths:

First, and most important to you, you are a child of your Heavenly Father, who loves you.

Second, your Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, loves you.

Third, like my grandchildren, I love and admire you—every one of you.

Whenever I visit with young adults, I like to learn more about what they are talking about and experiencing, including the latest technology

that they are using. I try to be connected as much as my ninety-one years can handle. However, I admit that I am barely able to figure out my smartphone—which, by the way, is really smart!

In my efforts to stay current, I recently learned that TikTok isn't just the sound of a clock! I have also learned a new expression that some of you probably use from time to time in reference to older people like me: "Okay, boomer!"

Before you assume that, I am not a boomer. I need to point out to you that I am not from that generation. I am a member of the Silent Generation. My generation fits quietly between the Greatest Generation and the baby boomers.

I often wonder why different generations are identified as though everyone born within a certain time span is supposed to think and act alike. Such identification can only defy the reality of individuality, based on one's personal circumstances and political, social, religious, and educational background.

M. Russell Ballard, acting president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on March 3, 2020.

That said, however, I really do want to understand and learn more about you millennials and Gen Zs. I have spent many hours listening, pondering, learning, and praying about your generations, because I love my grandchildren and you. Yes, over the years I have spent hours asking Heavenly Father to help me know how best to minister to you.

Unfortunately, sometimes your generations are criticized by those older than you. Perhaps you have also heard some criticism. However, I do not believe what they say. I am here this morning to tell you that just like I believe in my grandchildren, I believe in you! I love and admire you!

Bound by a Common Divine Heritage

Let me share a few things I especially appreciate about your generations and perhaps some things that older generations could learn from you.

The first things I have noticed is your desire to understand your true identity and your purpose.

I see how you ask difficult questions to promote change, providing you do not seek to compromise your eternal identity and purpose.

While you think about this, may I remind you that there is one important identity we all share now and forever, one that we should never ever lose sight of, and one that we should be grateful for. That is that you are and have always been a son or daughter of God with spiritual roots in eternity. First and foremost, you are and always will be a spirit child of God. Those aren't just words from a beautiful Primary song. They are words of truth. They are imbued with eternal significance for all of us.

The foundational fact of heavenly parentage is not just my truth or your truth. It is eternal truth. It is written in big, bold, capital letters. Understanding this truth—really understanding it and embracing it—is life changing. It gives you an extraordinary identity that no one can ever take away from you. But more than that, it should give you an enormous feeling of value and a sense of your infinite worth. Finally, it provides you a divine, noble, and worthy purpose in life.

Now please don't misunderstand me on this point. I am not saying that we must deny our many

identities, including ethnic, cultural, or national heritage. As stated on our FamilySearch website:

Knowing our cultural background and where we came from [in this world] can help us develop a strong sense of who we really are . . . [and help us] establish our unique, authentic [personal] identity.¹

If this is true about our specific family heritage, it is even more true about our divine family heritage as children of God.

A second thing I see about your generations is your commitment to a more sustainable future for all of God's children and creatures and the earth. Whether it is environmental, economic, or social, I would hope you will continue to find creative solutions to help protect the future for all of God's children in our world. We should do whatever we can to protect and preserve the earth, to make life better for those who will live here. We have a divine stewardship, as noted in Doctrine and Covenants 59:16–20.

As you do so, please remember that your eternal nature as a child of God is absolutely and completely sustainable. It will continue throughout time and eternity. You are a child of Heavenly Parents and will be forever—no matter what.

The third thing I see in your generations is your desire for authenticity and transparency. You have helped many of God's children find greater peace and hope. For example, although we have a long way to go, the openness I hear in discussions about mental and emotional health has made it easier for many to get the professional help and support they need without feeling any embarrassments or guilt. I thank you for this important and Christlike service.

And again, please make sure that your desire for openness begins with an openness and awareness of your role as a child of God.

Perhaps you are seeing a pattern. You and your generations are doing so many important things and have so much potential and greatness to do even more in your families, neighborhoods, and nations around the world. However, I plead with each of you to please keep your divine identity at the center of everything you do.

As children of God, we instinctively want to associate with each other. Whether we belong to a sports team, a musical group, a club, or other organization, being part of a group is often an important part of our identity. It also provides us purpose in life.

However, it can also be a distraction and hinder progress. Sadly, history has shown us that often we set up “group identities” based on false and incorrect ideologies that have harmed or marginalized others. Let me share one example that occurred when I was about your age.

Earlier this year we remembered the seventy-fifth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the Nazi death camps that took the lives of many people. It was a grim reminder of what can happen when people are categorized in specific groups, marginalized, and persecuted.

At Auschwitz, the Nazis systematically murdered as many as one million Jews. They also killed Roma people, gays, and certain other ethnic and religious minorities, including Jehovah’s Witnesses.² Marginalizing and persecuting people based on age, gender, nationality, religious preferences, or anything else can be hurtful and misunderstood.

To avoid such misunderstandings, we must always remember that there are also larger groups to which people belong.

In this country and in many other countries around the world, a great divide has grown between political parties. Belonging to a political party can be a very good thing when it helps us align ourselves with candidates and others who share our personal values and beliefs. But we must never forget that although we may be a member of a political party, we are first and foremost citizens or residents of our country. That larger and more important shared identity should bind us to one another and help us overcome the petty squabbling and demonization that has sadly become standard operating procedure in contemporary partisan politics throughout most of the world. That is why we need to constantly pray for our countries and for our leaders.

The same is true in relationships between nations and their peoples. Identifying with your

country of birth or your adopted country is appropriate. We need passports as well as the benefits of citizenship, and it is always fun to cheer on our country’s athletes at the Olympics. However, today we see where dedication to a false idea about one’s nation is destructive. In this case it is also important to remember that we are all part of a much larger society. That is, we are inhabitants of the same planet, and we are dependent upon each other for our mutual survival, happiness, and peace.

For us, the group that is most important to identify with is being the children of God. We declare that we are all the spiritual children of Heavenly Parents; thus we are brothers and sisters in God’s family. We will continue to be a part of God’s family after we die and throughout all eternity. Nothing can change that relationship. We must always keep this uppermost in our minds.

This knowledge also provides a divine, noble, and worthy purpose. That purpose is found in the two great commandments: we are to love the Lord with all our hearts, might, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.³

In January this country honored Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the great civil rights leader. Dr. King said the following in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, given on August 28, 1963:

*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*⁴

Dr. King dreamed of a day when people would look beyond the narrow categories that often separate us from each other and instead focus on higher ends. He dreamed of a day when his children would be seen for who they are and who they are becoming—for their character. Through discrimination, racism, sexism, and other social ills, we will often impose false identities on others that keep them and us from progressing.

This can stop when we see all people as children of God. We consider every person divine in origin, nature, and potential. Each possesses seeds of divinity. And “each is a beloved spirit [child] of heavenly parents.”⁵

My young friends, do you understand what I am saying? We have this in common with every person. We are all children of God. That makes us family—brothers and sisters bound by a common divine heritage. That one simple, unifying fact should override all else that we allow to cause separation and division among us.

Through the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, all people may “progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny.”⁶ As a child can follow and develop the attributes of his or her parents over time, the divine nature that humans inherit can be developed to become like that of their Heavenly Parents.

The Two Great Commandments

I find great joy in the knowledge that I am a son of a loving Heavenly Father who gave His Only Begotten Son for me and that I have, like each of you, a divine spiritual origin and nature—a right to all our Heavenly Father’s blessings and destiny, if I am worthy to receive them.

This identity provides my core purpose in life as a child of God, as noted above. My purpose is to love the Lord and to love my neighbor.

Let me address briefly what it means to love God and Jesus Christ. Jesus taught, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with *all thy heart*, and *with all thy soul*, and *with all thy mind*.”⁷

These actions encompass a purposeful life that is committed to loving the Lord intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

The Savior taught:

If ye love me, keep my commandments. . . .

*He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.*⁸

Keeping the commandments is essential if we are to truly love the Lord fully and completely. Keeping the commandments is eternally tied to our ordinances and commitment to faithfully live the gospel.

The second commandment is also important. In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus taught

that our neighbor may be someone from a different group—even a historic enemy.⁹

This should give you and me pause. To love your neighbor is to have compassion on those we meet, even if they belong to a different group and at times are identified as our enemies.

My dear brothers and sisters, with all my soul I invite you to keep your membership in God’s family first and foremost in your minds and to live the two great commandments.

I firmly believe the eternal truth that we are the children of God. He loves us and has prepared a great plan of happiness that allows the most growth, possibilities, and joy through the goodness and grace of His Only Begotten Son, whose suffering in Gethsemane and death on the cross provide us life, happiness, joy, and, ultimately, fulfillment.

As we celebrate the two-hundred-year anniversary of the First Vision, in which the Father and the Son appeared to Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove, we recognize that this event was just the beginning of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in preparation for the Savior’s Second Coming.

What followed the First Vision is a miracle! Priesthood authority, temple ordinances, covenants, additional scripture, including the Book of Mormon, and the knowledge from heaven that has been restored on earth.

In particular, the God of Heaven has revealed to His servants, the prophets, who He is and who His Beloved Son is and our true relationships with Them.

We are not created objects like a smartphone. We are literal children of God, and He knows us. And we can know Him because of our unique and close relationship with Him through our prayers, obedience, and service one to another.

Paul said, “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.”¹⁰

These Eternal Truths

Let me provide you with some specific counsel and direction. I apply these general principles to your situation here today.

When I received this assignment to speak to you, I felt deeply impressed that I needed to

highlight the truth about being daughters and sons of God.

I believe that is the message the Lord wanted me to share with you today. In the past few weeks, as I have read news stories and social media posts about what has happened on campus, I knew why the Lord wanted me to speak on this important subject.

Let me assure you that the Lord is aware of you. He loves you. He is concerned about you individually and collectively.

He is anxious to heal any “wounded souls” on this campus and to bring together each and every one of you in love and peace. We can help in the process as we love, seek forgiveness, offer forgiveness, and seek to build bridges of understanding.

The Savior taught, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”¹¹

This does not deny the need for open and honest discussions on campus to resolve issues and deal with challenges. What this provides is an antidote to anger, ill feelings, distrust, hate, or demonizing one another.

Of all the universities in the world, BYU should be where Jesus’s teachings and commandments are proclaimed, discussed, and lived.

Jesus said:

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. . . .

*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*¹²

I invite you to look deep in your souls and ask how you can fulfill your purpose of being a child of God by loving the Lord and loving your neighbor more faithfully than you ever have before.

In this educational setting, I guess I may appropriately extend to each of you a simple invitation that we could maybe identify as a homework assignment of sort.

Please consider reviewing the message I have shared with you today by finding truth the Lord has intended for you personally.

You might best accomplish this by finding some quiet time in which you can think through where you are with your relationship with Heavenly Father and His Son and His Church.

At different times in the Savior’s life, He took opportunities to be alone to ponder and pray. I invite you to spend some time in the next few days to be alone in a quiet place to commune with your Heavenly Father and learn how to better understand and serve each other by helping and lifting each other.

In the end, my dear young friends, do not wear yourselves out worrying about things that matter least at the expense of what matters the most in your lives.

Let me repeat: Please remember that, first, your Heavenly Father loves you, and, second, your Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, loves you. Get these truths right in your mind and then sink them deep into your heart. They will provide you a compass for how you should act and how you should treat others, and they will give you the strength to overcome temptation and stay on the Church covenant path.

It will also give you the courage to correct anything in your life that is not in harmony with being a faithful child of God by keeping the two great commandments of God, by loving God, and by loving your neighbor.

Your generations are the best at sharing things on social media. Share what you have come to feel and know for yourself about your true identity as a daughter or son of Heavenly Father. We need your help to spread these great truths.

Now, I am an old man, and I do not know how much longer I will be around. But I do want you to know this: if I ever see you here or on the other side of the veil and you come up to me, I hope you will never say, “Well, you didn’t tell me.”

I am trying to tell you today, the best way I know how from living ninety-one years. The little things in life are what matter most. The important thing is knowing who we are and following the great pathway, the great road to immortality and eternal life. That is the treasure, brothers and sisters. May God bless you, each and every one

of you, the precious youth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints being educated in this great and wonderful university of the Lord.

I testify that God our Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ love all of you, and I hope you know of my love for you. You are the future generations to lead the Church. May the Lord bless you precious youth now and always. I leave you my witness and testimony: all that I have said to you this morning is true. And I bear that testimony very humbly in the sacred and beloved name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Rachel Coleman, “Why We Need Family History Now More Than Ever,” *FamilySearch* (blog), 26 September 2017, familysearch.org/blog/en/family-history-2.
2. See “Ethnic Origins and Number of Victims of Auschwitz,” Auschwitz.org, [70.auschwitz.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id](http://70.auschwitz.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=89&Itemid=173&lang=en)

[=89&Itemid=173&lang=en](http://70.auschwitz.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=89&Itemid=173&lang=en); see also “Auschwitz,” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/Auschwitz.

3. See Matthew 22:34–40; D&C 4:2; D&C 59:5–6.
4. Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” speech at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC, 28 August 1963; “I Have a Dream: Full Text March on Washington Speech,” NAACP.org, naacp.org/i-have-a-dream-speech-full-march-on-washington.
5. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (23 September 1995).
6. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”
7. Matthew 22:37; emphasis added.
8. John 14:15, 21; emphasis added; see also verses 16–18.
9. See Luke 10:25–37.
10. Romans 8:16.
11. John 13:35.
12. Matthew 5:14, 16.