

# *That We May Become*

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The trauma and devastation of the wind, mudslides, and floods of recent months have created opportunities for expressions of love, care, and concern throughout our area. It has been said, in fact, that these catastrophes were in part a blessing because of the resulting opportunities to serve. We have witnessed open expressions of brotherhood that often are not evident in the day-to-day unfolding of our lives, and these expressions have crossed boundaries of age, creed, and color. A deep sense of joy and satisfaction has been present as we have shared or observed this outpouring of love. While I was at a national professional meeting a short time ago, individuals from across the country wanted to discuss what they had seen and heard in the media. They frequently spoke of the services rendered to individuals and families as well as for the public good. They talked about the manifestations of genuine love as demonstrated through service and sharing. These experiences have stimulated me to ponder once again why the behaviors so evident in emergencies are less often present in our everyday lives. Why does it take a crisis to bring out our feelings of love and concern for a family member, a friend, a neighbor, or a stranger? Why is an abundance of love so seldom present in our lives? Why,

when we have a choice between a fullness of love and something less, do we so frequently choose something less?

As a people, we have all been taught from our youth:

*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.*

*On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. [Matthew 22:37–40]*

We know in theory that love is manifest through service—service to our Heavenly Father, to others, and to ourselves—and that we need a balance that helps us keep our perspective. This knowledge, however, does not automatically make love in this sense an integral part of our lives. I would like in the time that is allotted me today to explore with you some thoughts about love—learned from the scriptures and from experiences in living.

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After a very brief review of the importance of patterning our lives on the principles of love, I will touch on two aspects of love as it relates to our individual lives—first, some benefits of living a life permeated with love and, second, some obstacles that inhibit our capacity to love. As I discuss these two aspects—(1) the benefits that come from living a life of love and (2) the obstacles to our doing so—I would like you to keep in mind a verse I learned as a child. It goes like this:

*If white is good  
And black is bad,  
Then all my friends  
Are gray or plaid.*

It suggests that the benefits and obstacles are not clearly separate, but are perhaps more like opposite sides of the same coin.

### **Love—The Way to Perfection**

To begin—why is it important to pattern our lives on the principle of love? The answer to that question is nowhere more clearly emphasized, it seems to me, than in Matthew 5:43–48. We are all familiar with verse 48, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,” but have we dwelt on the verses which immediately precede it?

*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;*

*That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.*

*For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?*

*And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?*

*Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.*

Love is the basis for becoming perfect or, as the father of one of my special friends said: “The perfection connection is love.” We ought therefore to be attentive to its place in our lives. We must be cognizant of the fact that though love comes from God, as Truman Madsen has stated, “Knowing ‘where it comes from’ is not the same as receiving and giving it. . . . All of us need constant reminders that we cannot have the fruits of love without being in touch with the roots” (Truman G. Madsen, “Joseph Smith and the Sources of Love,” in *Four Essays on Love* [Provo: Communications Workshop, 1971], p. 9).

There is an integral relationship between loving our Father in Heaven, loving our neighbors, and loving ourselves. Love in these realms gives perspective to all of the laws and the commandments. Thus we cannot afford to just wait for “love” to happen in our lives. We ought to seek it, to refine it, to be sensitive to its presence or absence, to its vitality and strength, because love is essential.

### **Benefits of Love**

What then are the potential consequences, the benefits, of living a life patterned on the principle of love? In what ways does it make a difference? These questions may require a lifetime, even an eternity, to answer because as our capacity to love increases, we see new horizons—new levels on which we can express love. There are, however, some important consequences that can be experienced and understood now. We do know that we are loved by our Heavenly Father and that great blessings are available if we can reciprocate that love. In 1 Corinthians 2:9 we read, “But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.” If we accept and return the love extended to us

by God and recognize that it is extended to all mankind—that we are indeed his children—we then have a perspective of who we are and who others are, and that perspective is circumscribed by love.

Knowing our Father loves us and that He created each of us and endowed us with the capacity to fulfill the purposes of life provides us the basis for understanding our worth. Self-esteem and self-confidence flourish in the bonds of love.

I had an experience some five years ago which was deeply moving for me and which in a quiet moment allowed me to see self-esteem, self-confidence, and love all at once. My sister and her family came to spend the night with me. After prayers we all retired. As Nanette, my three-and-a-half-year-old niece, climbed into bed with me, she said, “I didn’t kiss my mother and father good night.” So she climbed out of bed, went to their bedroom, and kissed them good night. When she returned, she cuddled up to me and said, “Aunt Ruth, Heavenly Father loves me; my mother loves me; my father loves me; you love me; Aunt Carol loves me; my Grandmother Brasher in Duncan, Oklahoma, on a mission loves me; my Grandma Mortensen loves me; my Grandpa Mortensen loves me,” and she went on to name Aunt Elaine, Uncle Wallace, cousins Margaret, Jordon, and Yvonne, and then she stopped.

I asked, “But what about Aunt Pat, Uncle Jim, Todd, and Heather?”

Before I could proceed with the list, she interrupted: “Aunt Ruth, I am not telling you everybody in the world that loves me and that I love. I am only telling you the ones that live in Provo; Duncan, Oklahoma; Emery; and Huntington.” The specific identification of individuals was significant to me. Love to her was not something abstract, something to generalize about—it was specific. Knowing that she was loved and that she loved others radiated in her self-esteem and her self-confidence.

This love created for Nanette an awareness that she matters and that others matter. She had then and continues to this day to have a sense of peace and a freedom to grow because she is secure. She knows she matters in important ways. When our lives are patterned on the principle of love, we too are secure—secure in an overriding sense even in the face of uncertainty, disappointment, and discouragement about specific aspects of our lives. Thus, we too are free to grow because we understand who we are, and we are in the bonds of love. We know that a loving Father gives us opportunities to struggle because struggle can produce growth and increase our understanding of what love is.

As I contemplated this shared moment with Nanette, I remembered a short incident reported many years ago in the *Improvement Era*. It related the comments of a young boy of about four as his mother tucked him into bed. He asked, “Mother, do you love everybody in the world?”

She responded, “Oh, yes, son. It is important that we love everyone. That is what Heavenly Father wants us to do.”

His reply was stunning: “I don’t. I only love the people in my life.”

How often do we profess that we love everyone while our interaction with the important people in our lives demonstrates something far short of love? Sometimes, interaction with family and our friends may not center on love and support at all and may even be destructive. There seems to be an assumption that since our family and friends know us well, they will understand if we don’t behave lovingly and will love us anyway. This is a deception. Such behavior has the power to inflict deep hurt. Willard Gaylin, author of *Feelings: Our Vital Signs*, stated it succinctly: “We can be touched—and delighted—by an unexpected kindness or courtesy from strangers. When we are ‘hurt,’ it is invariably by those we love”

(Willard Gaylin, “Being Touched, Being Hurt,” *Psychology Today*, December 1978, p. 117).

Understanding who we are and that we are loved enhances our awareness of the opportunity to strive for perfection, not to achieve it in the foreseeable future but to experience the process—the eternal process. In this context, growth in self-control and self-mastery can become an adventure of stimulating proportions, not just an agony of restraint. Accepting others as well as ourselves as individuals who are in the process of growth permits us to see them in a different light. We can love them as we love ourselves, recognizing that we are all fallible. None of us has been translated. We all need room for error, for falling short, for weakness and inconsistency, for growth as we recognize our shortcomings. We can give ourselves as well as others a break. We can serve, with this understanding, in a spirit of helpfulness as opposed to serving as a matter of duty. There can be warmth and caring even in difficult situations.

Yes, lives patterned on the principle of eternal love establish a perspective for us, who we are and who others are and our relationship to our Heavenly Father—that perspective makes all the difference.

With little effort, some study, and a moment of contemplation, I suspect we could each identify a number of specific differences genuine love can make in our lives. Here is just one example of a specific difference to start us thinking. We read in 1 John 4:18: “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.” Freedom from fear can be an important mobilizing factor in our lives. We note in D&C 60:2 that some “hide the talent . . . given unto them, because of the fear of man,” and in Psalms 90:11 that “even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath,” and in Proverbs 29:25 that “the fear of man bringeth a snare.” Think for a moment. Do you have hidden talents? Have you hesitated to work with

them, to develop them, because someone else does it better or because someone may laugh if you try or because someone will know you have a weakness? How often is your anger related to a fear that someone may obtain something you desire or that there is some uncertainty about your place in a situation? When were you last in an untenable position because you were afraid of the consequences of telling the truth and tried to cover your actions? All these responses to fear require time, energy, and emotional input which are nonproductive. Thus, since love eliminates fear, our productive potential is freed to focus on producing rather than on protecting ourselves.

This is one of the places where the gray and plaid sense of categories becomes so evident. While love casting out fear is clearly a positive consequence, we note that fear is an obstacle.

### **Obstacles to Love**

Now, back to my central thesis—the perfection connection is love, and its presence in our lives is enriching. Given the importance of this concept and the potential we have to strengthen this quality in our individual lives, let’s examine some of the obstacles (in addition to fear) that inhibit our achievement of the fullness of love in our lives.

I will explore these obstacles from two points of view: (1) what we do to ourselves and (2) our responses to others and the resulting consequences for us. What do we do to ourselves that limits our capacity to love? One thing we might do is to close ourselves to ourselves. This closure occurs when our lives become circumscribed by behaviors and attitudes which tend to be so narrowly focused that they never allow us to really discover ourselves. This frame of mind may produce a self-love which is destructive because it creates a smoke screen that prevents us from seeing our wholeness, our potential for growth, our vulnerability, our need for others. Included

among these behaviors and attitudes are such things as pride, arrogance, vanity, boastfulness, jealousy, and envy. Each of these is an obstacle. Frequently they are spoken of together in the scriptures. For example, Proverbs 8:13 says, “Pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate.” And Paul wrote to Timothy:

*This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.*

*For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy,*

*Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good,*

*Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God;*

*Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. . . .*

*Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. [2 Timothy 3:1–5, 7]*

The truth is veiled because we see only in part.

The tenth Psalm also speaks of divers acts of the wicked. Many of the behaviors identified by Paul to Timothy are noted there too. Like the apostle, the psalmist suggests why these behaviors are so serious and why they might blind us to ourselves and to others.

They imply an absence of love. He condemns the wicked for such disregard for others as the persecution of the poor, deceit, and fraud and further states that “God is not in all his thoughts” (verse 4).

When we become so caught up in ourselves that we cannot give heed to our Creator, our fellowmen, or our *true selves*, we are not moving toward perfection.

There are many ways in which our words and deeds may project these limiting characteristics. For example, we may emphasize in the academic setting that wisdom which evolves from love and living is not enough and suggest

in our arrogance that this wisdom is nothing. We may be so confident of our own capacities that we cannot learn from others, or we choose not to share with others because they have nothing to offer us. We may take advantage of others because of our cleverness—our superior capacity. President John Taylor warned against such behavior. He said,

*Because one man is more talented than another, he should not use that talent to take advantage of his brother, and then expect that God will approve of his actions, for he will not do it; he never did, nor ever will. We should operate for one another’s interest, having sympathetic feelings for each other. We are supposed to be brethren in the Church and kingdom of God, knit together by the indissoluble ties of the everlasting Gospel, not for time only, but for eternity. Hence all our operations should be for that end, founded on the principles of righteousness and friendship. [JD 18:284]*

Yes, pride, arrogance, vanity, boastfulness, jealousy, and envy may be irritating to others, but they are likely to be devastating to us because they blind us.

I think of the example of a missionary who made it very clear to everyone in the mission field that he knew more scriptures than anyone else. In fact, he had practically memorized the four standard works. He took every opportunity to be sure that everyone knew that he knew them. The tragedy of the situation was that there seemed to be a lack of understanding, that knowing the words is not sufficient, that we should also understand the meaning and reflect the principles in our lives.

Another set of attitudes that may permeate our lives and inhibit our capacity to love has important impacts on others as well as ourselves. These attitudes are covetousness and greed. In our acquisitive society the desire to get and to have seems almost insatiable at times. We want and we take with no thought

of others' needs. We often desire more than anyone needs or deserves. We lose an appreciation for living frugally, not because we have to but because it is a good way to live, as William F. Edwards, a financier, economist, and former BYU vice-president, has so often stressed.

A marvelous ad with an important message for all of us recently appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, placed there by a Nebraska-based energy corporation. It said,

*Please don't eat the seed corn.* [Now if you were born in Emery County, as I was, or in the Midwest, you know that seed corn is essential to next year's crop. If you eat it now, next year's crop is finished.] *In our consumption-oriented society the temptation of success is to devour the harvest, to enjoy the fruits of the moment without planning for the future. That's as dangerous in industry as it is in agriculture.*

I suggest that it is even more dangerous when today's consumption impacts on our potential opportunity for growth now and throughout eternity. It reminds me of the prodigal son. Time, strength, resources, and talents were lost which eternity cannot replace.

Are we part of the group that eats the seed corn? Are we sensitive to the appropriate use of resources? Do we perceive the effects of greed in our lives and its impact on the achievement or development of love in our lives? Many of us have probably never seriously considered these questions. When we read, "And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24), we are likely to think, "That doesn't apply to me. I am not rich." There are two assumptions embodied in these thoughts: (1) that being rich means having more than I have, and (2) that if I am not rich, I cannot be greedy. I question both the assumptions—richness and capacity for greed.

During the time my parents were serving in the Arizona Holbrook Mission, I joined them for a few days at Christmastime. Christmas morning we delivered treats and greetings to some of the families with whom they worked. As I stood in the center of one of the hogans surveying the surroundings and the people, I was overwhelmed with a sense of my richness in terms of material possessions and awed by the sense of peace, happiness, and contentment that radiated from the faces of the extended-family members who were present. "Could I be this content in these circumstances?" I asked myself. "What did I do to deserve what I have? What are my responsibilities? What are my values? What really matters?"

Am I rich? The answer depends on the comparative basis I choose to use—but in my heart I know that I have enough of this world's material blessings and that I will be accountable for my use of them. Are you rich? Do you have enough and to spare? How can that determination be made? When we use more than our share of the earth's resources, are we rich or are we greedy, or are we both rich and greedy? Are we greedy in our demands? Are we accountable?

Greed can canker our souls, and we lose perspective about who we are and our purpose in life. We may be consuming the seed corn.

*Wo unto you rich men, that will not give your substance to the poor, for your riches will canker your souls; and this shall be your lamentation in the day of visitation, and of judgment, and of indignation: The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and my soul is not saved!* [D&C 56:16]

Will we be found among those who lament? Those who have learned too late the importance of giving and of love?

There is further scriptural evidence to suggest that greed and love are not compatible and that the consequences of greed in one's life are far-reaching. For example,

*Yea, they are greedy dogs which can never have enough, and they are shepherds that cannot understand: they all look to their own way, every one for his gain, from his quarter.*

*Come ye, say they, I will fetch wine, and we will fill ourselves with strong drink; and tomorrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.* [Isaiah 56:11–12]

The implication that one cannot understand when one's attention is focused on "never enough" and the "anticipation of more" is frightening.

Thinking of "never enough" reminds me of the young boy who requested more dessert at the conclusion of a Sunday dinner to which his family had several guests. His mother explained that there was no more dessert. This news did not please him, and he responded, "I never get all I want to eat."

His mother in self-defense and embarrassment said, "We always have plenty to eat."

The boy still chafing retorted, "There've been lots of times I've eaten all I could, but never all I wanted."

Are some of us like him? Are we struggling for more—for no more important reason than we just want more? In this frame of mind, what is it that we do not understand? Ezekiel elaborates on this subject in chapter 34. The shepherds fed and clothed themselves; they did not feed the sheep or care for the diseased or the sick. They did not protect the sheep from becoming lost. They did not understand the need for and meaning of love—not that self should not receive attention, but that there should be balance in life, between self and others.

Lest we think that greed applies only to financial and material goods, I hasten to note, as implied in Ezekiel, that it also includes our time, our talents, and our care and concern. These are areas of our lives in which we may also demand more than we deserve and give less than we ought. N. Eldon Tanner, a man

who was truly generous in all aspects of his life, said, "The most difficult thing for us seems to be to give of ourselves, to do away with selfishness. If we really love someone, nothing is a hardship" (CR, April 1967, p. 104). This message is echoed by the inscription on the statue of a boy carrying his brother located at Boys Town, Nebraska: "He ain't heavy, Father, he's my brother."

The challenge to give of ourselves may be further increased by a pervading theme of our time—self-fulfillment. The emphasis on self-fulfillment rests on a seldom-articulated base of greed which says that I must pay attention to "me first" and in the process hope that others may be benefited because I am doing what makes me happiest. Daniel Yankelovich, in exploring the ideas about self-fulfillment in "New Rules in American Life: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down," published in *Psychology Today* in April 1981, has counseled the self-fulfillment seekers: "The injunction that to find one's self one must lose oneself contains a truth any seeker of self-fulfillment needs to grasp" (p. 50). This concept was grasped by both President Tanner and the anonymous boy.

There are those, however, on the other side of the coin who because of inadequate love and appreciation of themselves fail to fill their own wells. They are selfish toward themselves and are thus unable to establish an effective, loving relationship with others. Again we see the need for balance—a love of self and neighbor in a framework of loving our Creator.

### **Love Looks Outward**

It becomes evident that a life patterned on the principle of love requires developing an acceptance and love of self and from this base doing a considerable amount of looking outward. On the other hand, achieving a life patterned on the principle of love is hindered by lack of self-acceptance and an undue amount of looking inward—focusing on self. We have

the power to decide which way we want to look—to choose to enhance our capacity to love or to choose something less. We can take steps which will enhance the quality of love in our lives. We can refine it. We can choose to help it grow. We can start from where we are and begin an eternal quest to emulate our Father in Heaven in His capacity to love. Mastery of love—the perfection connection—demands love of self and others in the bonds of love of our Heavenly Father.

It is my prayer that, as we grow in our understanding of the centrality of love in our movement toward perfection, we may apply ourselves to incorporating it in our lives and become active participants on the path to perfection.

May we be worthy to receive the blessings Paul promised to the Thessalonians: “And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men” (1 Thessalonians 3:12)—and may I add toward our Heavenly Father and toward ourselves, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.