

“As I Have Loved You”: Agency-Based Love in Dating and Marriage

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Good morning, brothers and sisters. For more than twenty-five years, both as a student and now as a professor here at Brigham Young University, I have been personally blessed by many of the messages shared in these devotionals. It is truly a humbling experience to speak with you today.

When I first was invited to give a devotional address, I was initially assigned to speak the Tuesday during the week of Valentine’s Day back in February. While I am sure that the selection of this date was simply a practical matter of arranging the schedule, for someone who has spent the last decade teaching the marriage preparation classes here on campus, I felt a certain amount of pressure to tie my remarks into a Valentine’s Day theme. Plus, one of my most memorable experiences with a BYU devotional happened many years ago when Elder Jeffrey R. Holland spoke during Valentine’s Day week about understanding the true nature of love in dating and marriage relationships¹—so I figured he would be a good role model for me to follow.

However, as final scheduling was put into place, I was asked to move to this devotional slot during the first week of April. When this

happened, I wondered if I should perhaps change the focus of my remarks. But seeing as how the only holiday I can tie into this week is April Fools’ Day, I figured I would stick with my original plans—although I am sure that there are some of you who have probably had some dating experiences that you would say fit an April Fools’ Day theme quite well.

I should note as I get started that while I would like to talk about how each of us can more fully emulate the Savior’s example of agency-based love in our current or future dating and marriage relationships, I believe that the principles I will discuss are applicable to a wide range of other relationships as well, including friendships, parenting, and other family relationships.

I should also note that while I will share some insights with you from my studies as a marriage researcher over the years, the truest and most transformative lessons I have ever had on the subject of love I have learned from my dear

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wife, Stefani. Indeed, the testimony of marriage that I have been privileged to share with the students on this campus for nearly twenty years stems primarily from the beauty of marriage that I experience with her every day. In a few weeks Stefani and I will celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of our first date, and I am grateful every day for the blessing she is in my life. I am also grateful that all of my children could be here today, including my new daughter-in-law. I love each of them dearly, and my remarks today are as much for them as they are for anyone (but they will likely just roll their eyes and tell you that they have heard it all before).

For my remarks today, I would like to address three questions about love.

1. How Important Is Love?

The first question is, How important is love? And, in particular to our emphasis today, How important is love in dating and marriage? On the surface this question sounds like one of those questions in Sunday School classes that are so obvious that no one wants to answer them. Almost everyone instinctively answers this question by saying that of course love is very important to successful couple relationships. In fact, in our culture today many would say that love is the only true reason for a couple to come together and stay together in marriage.

However, while affirming the importance of love in dating and marriage relationships appears obvious and self-evident, such an answer assumes that we have a consensus about what the word *love* means. In romantic relationships we often say that someone is *in love*—but again, what exactly does that mean?

Part of the complexity of understanding love comes from the fact that we use the term in very diverse and inconsistent ways. We may use the term *love* to describe our relationship with our fiancé or spouse, but we also say that we *love* double-fudge ice cream. Clearly we don't mean the same thing—or at least I really hope we don't mean the same thing! But being explicit about our definitions of love is much more than a semantic exercise. In fact, different conceptions of love are

often at the root of the different trajectories we see in couple relationships, for better or for worse.

As we ponder on the importance of love, it is instructive to consider the following excerpt from C. S. Lewis's book *The Screwtape Letters*. In this classic apologetic novel, we follow the correspondence between two devils. The first, Uncle Screwtape, is a master devil, and the second, Wormwood, is his nephew and an apprentice devil still learning the trade. One area of training discussed involves how to ruin marriages.

Uncle Screwtape admonished his young nephew Wormwood that “humans can be made to infer the false belief that the blend of affection, fear, and desire which they call ‘being in love’ is the only thing that makes marriage either happy or holy.”² Uncle Screwtape explained that this form of deception keeps men and women from recognizing the deeper nature and purposes of their current or future marriages, which he described as “the intention of loyalty to a partnership for mutual help, for the preservation of chastity, and for the transmission of life.”³

Uncle Screwtape's tactic of leading people to believe that marriage should be based on the emotional state of “being in love” and primarily aimed at creating personal happiness seems to be particularly effective in our broader culture today. Reflecting the individualistic, consumer-driven, soulmate-searching trends of our day, the dominant story of marriage in our wider culture is the story of falling in love and finding personal fulfillment in a love relationship.

As a result, many young adults—and also some not-so-young adults—struggle in their relationships because they primarily think of love as an intense feeling or state of being that they cannot quite explain, but they are sure they will know it when they see it—and they often struggle to know if their current relationship has enough of it. In some cases individuals fear to commit to what appear to be very promising relationships out of concern that they are not in love enough. And far too often other couples who feel very much in love begin marriages with hopes of achieving a happy marriage, only to see those dreams end in disappointment.

Now let me pause for a moment here. My experience tells me that this is where I may be starting to lose some of you. We seldom question this culturally dictated story of marriage or the idea that the feeling of love is the primary factor that makes marriage work. So some of you are probably thinking, “But isn’t being in love an important part of a successful marriage?” Others of you may even be wondering, “Is he suggesting we shouldn’t want to be happy in our marriages?” My response to these reactions is that of course love and happiness matter, but while feelings of love and happiness are indeed present in good marriages, they are best understood as the fruits of those relationships, not necessarily the roots.

Properly understood, love is indeed a key part of a lasting marriage. But improper understandings of love—which unfortunately are common in our culture today—are responsible for many of the struggles some individuals and couples have in dating, courtship, and marriage.

In short, what I am suggesting is that our culture today deeply values the fruits of a good marriage, such as love and happiness, but we are increasingly disconnecting these fruits from the true roots that make them possible. Loving and lasting marriages are true partnerships in which spouses are devoted to creating a shared life together that is larger than the emotional payoff of the marriage. And this truth deepens even further when spouses form a covenant relationship dedicated to shared discipleship and the formation of an eternal family. This view of marriage gives us more than feelings of happiness; it helps make our lives rich and meaningful.

So instead of discarding current views of love altogether, I am suggesting that we will all benefit from broadening and deepening our thinking about love and what a good marriage is and, most important, how such relationships come to be. Our understandings of a good marriage should include feelings of love and happiness, but we need to make sure that we also emphasize the far richer and more enduring aspects of relationships—which paradoxically make the very happiness we hope for all the more possible to achieve.

2. What Is the True Nature of Love?

That brings us to our next question: What, then, is the proper view of love? And how do we avoid falling into Screwtape’s trap in our own current or future dating and marriage relationships? How can we assure ourselves of having the deeper, fuller foundations of love in our relationships?

As with all meaningful questions in life, the answer is found in emulating the example of our Savior Jesus Christ. In fact, emulating Him in how we love was one of the Savior’s final instructions to His disciples when He said, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you” (John 13:34). “As I have loved you”—that is how Christ asks us to love. How can we come to love as the Savior loves? That, my dear friends, is one of the very few questions in life we truly need to answer.

Nearly twenty years ago, during his Valentine’s week devotional from this pulpit, Elder Holland discussed this invitation to emulate the Savior’s pattern of love in dating and marriage. And his insights are even more needed in relationships today. He said, “Christlike staying power in romance and marriage requires more than any of us really have. It requires something more, an endowment from heaven.”⁴

What does it mean when Elder Holland said that “staying power” in marriage will require “more than any of us really have”? Quite simply, it means that on our own, none of us will individually have enough feelings of love to keep our marriage and family relationships going strong through the natural ups and downs of life. We will need to become more than we naturally are.

Elder Holland then pointed out a crucial and comforting truth—that each of us can be endowed with the love we will need. He then referenced the prophet Mormon’s teachings on charity,⁵ in which Mormon taught:

Charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever. . . .

. . . 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. [Moroni 7:47–48]

Please note that, according to Mormon, charity is not simply a different amount of love; it is a different type of love. It is not just different in degree; it is different in kind.

We also see that Christ is the only true source of enduring love. He is this in two ways: First, Christ is our one complete example of how to love. Second, He is the only true source from which we can receive this love. Thus, as in all things, Christ shows us what we are to become and then empowers us to follow His example.

Elder Holland explained:

*True charity, the absolutely pure, perfect love of Christ, has really been known only once in this world—in the form of Christ Himself, the living Son of the living God. . . . As in everything, Christ is the only one who got it all right, did it all perfectly, loved the way we are all to try to love. But even though we fall short, that divine standard is there for us. It is a goal toward which we are to keep reaching, keep striving—and, certainly, a goal to keep appreciating.*⁶

Thus we see that, in the light of the restored gospel, love is so much more than an emotion or feeling. Indeed, properly understood love is not a state of being, it is an actual Being. And that Being is Christ Himself. We, in fact, worship the living, breathing embodiment of love. Charity is the pure love of Christ because it is His love, and, because He is indeed the promised Messiah, through His infinite Atonement we can each be endowed with this love. This endowment involves coming to see as He sees, understand as He understands, prioritize what He prioritizes, choose what He chooses, and, ultimately, do what He does. As we strive to be true followers of Christ, He can shape our hearts, elevate our desires, purify our motivations, and magnify our actions so that we, in time, can come to love as He loves and ultimately live as He lives.

Returning to Elder Holland’s devotional remarks, Elder Holland said the following about this endowment of love:

It doesn’t come without effort and it doesn’t come without patience, but, like salvation itself, in the end

*it is a gift, given by God to the “true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ” [Moroni 7:48]. The solutions to life’s problems are always gospel solutions. Not only are answers found in Christ, but so is the power, the gift, the bestowal, the miracle of giving and receiving those answers. In this matter of love, no doctrine could be more encouraging to us than that.*⁷

Agency, Covenants, and Love

Perhaps the central message I wish to convey in my remarks today, particularly to my young friends here, is that emulating the Savior and following His injunction to love as He loves involves embracing an agency-based view of love. As Elder Lynn G. Robbins pointed out in his book *Love Is a Choice*, “Because love is as much a verb as it is a noun, the phrase ‘I love you’ is as much a promise of behavior and commitment as it is an expression of feeling.”⁸

In both His example and teachings, the Savior conveyed that love is expressed in multiple ways within relationships. When pronouncing the first of all commandments, Jesus said, “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment” (Mark 12:30).

In modern-day revelation, we see that the word *love* appears five times in the proclamation on the family, and each time it is linked with action words such as “to love and care” or “to love and serve.”⁹ Thus the language of the Lord suggests that love falls within the scope of our agency. Love is something we do, something we can control, and ultimately something we can choose—if not, God could not command us to love one another (see John 13:34).

Love and the Relationship Sciences

It bears mentioning that a second witness for the value of an agency-based approach to love in marriage and family relationships is found in the relationship sciences. Family researchers have long recognized that there are different types of love and that some types of or approaches to love are better than others in forming and maintaining strong relationships.

Dr. Patricia Noller, a leading family psychologist from Australia, reviewed dozens of studies and concluded that strong and healthy family relationships are based in what she called mature love. Mature love, she concluded, is made up of three interconnected dimensions: an emotional dimension, consisting of our feelings and emotions; a cognitive dimension, made up of our attitudes, priorities, and choices; and a behavioral dimension, consisting of our actions and behaviors. Mature love is contrasted with what she calls immature love, which primarily emphasizes the emotional dimension alone and makes the practice of loving choices and behaviors conditional and contingent upon the emotional state of the relationship.¹⁰

Dr. Noller and other experts emphasize that these distinctions are important because the emotional aspect of love, though needed and important, is often the most unstable dimension in relationships. Emotions by their nature can ebb and flow and change with the experiences of life. Our priorities, choices, and behaviors, on the other hand, can be intentional, stable, and consistent. Additionally, when we experience a drop in the emotional feelings in a romantic relationship, a mature view of love recognizes that we can continue to choose to love our partner and to act in loving ways that will foster a healing and restoring of our feelings of love.

Thus, both the teachings of scripture and the findings from relationship research teach us that loving and lasting marriages are not as much a matter of couples falling in love as an agency-based pattern of couples choosing in love, doing in love, and growing in love in their relationships.

3. How Can We Actively Create Loving Relationships?

My final question moves us to application: How can we use an agency-based approach to love to actually create and produce love in our relationships? The answers to this question point us to the true roots of marriage, which individuals and couples can foster with their intentional choices and actions. Allow me to share five principles for creating love in our relationships.

Principle 1—Thoughtful Service Produces Love

When I counsel with individuals or couples who are wondering if they are in love enough in their dating relationships, I encourage them to evaluate the amount of loving behaviors in their relationship. How we feel may be uncertain or confusing at times, but how we treat others and how we are treated in relationships is much more certain. Each of us will benefit from deepening our commitment to engage in regular service in our marriage and family relationships.

The value of loving behaviors is particularly important during times of differences and disagreement in a couple's relationship. For too many couples, disagreements lead to hurt feelings, which are then used to justify the withholding of needed loving behaviors and actions.

One of the repeated lessons my students have heard from me over the years is this statement: "In relationships, differences are not problems, they are opportunities!" This is because differences invite each of us to see our partner for who they really are and to be responsive to his or her needs. Differences provide each of us a chance to show a truly unique form of other-centeredness that helps others feel valued and loved. I think this is what President Gordon B. Hinckley wanted us to know when he said, "True love is not so much a matter of romance as it is a matter of anxious concern for the well being of one's companion."¹¹

Principle 2—Commitment Produces Love

One of the most common myths I hear when it comes to dating is when someone states, "When I find a really good relationship, I am going to commit to it." The reason why this is a myth is that really good relationships do not exist without commitment. Commitment is one of the fundamental parts of creating an enduring environment of love in a relationship. Yes, it is true—thank goodness!—that in dating, commitment should come in a sequence of progressive steps and stages, not all at once. But in time, only complete devotion between two people can foster a long-term view of the relationship that will ultimately justify the day-to-day investments that are needed to create a really good relationship.

Without proper commitment at the proper time, dating relationships languish in a wait-and-see pattern that leads one or both partners to hold back rather than deeply invest. Unfortunately, lopsided or asymmetrical commitment in dating relationships—in which one partner is deeply committed but the other is not—has become an epidemic in our culture today.

At its core, commitment is a choice that is manifest in our repeated behaviors, particularly in behaviors involving personal sacrifice. In his book *Covenant Hearts*, Elder Bruce C. Hafen compared the parable of the Good Shepherd in the New Testament to the marriage covenant—emphasizing that this passage of scripture may be our best description of the nature of the commitment the Lord’s intends for us to have in our marriages. In particular, he contrasted the devotion of the Good Shepherd, who “giveth his life for the sheep,” with the self-interested motivations of the hireling, who “leaveth” and “fleeth” when a wolf threatens the sheep (John 10:11–12).¹²

Reflecting on this teaching has been truly transformative for me in my own marriage. On a number of occasions, particularly at times of struggle or disagreement or when I am wallowing in self-justifying behavior, I have had the question come to my mind, “Are you being a shepherd or a hireling?” And if I am humble enough, I admit that I am acting like a hireling and that my spouse and my marriage deserve more.

In more than twenty-five years of marriage now, I have had a number of times when my sweet wife has truly been my shepherd, when it has been my wolf that comes and she has loved me through my struggles. And I have tried to do the same for her. I have seen how such shared experiences with struggle, trial, and growth have deepened our love and appreciation for each other in ways we didn’t even know were possible in our dating and courtship years.

Principle 3—Equal Partnership Produces Love

In my marriage preparation and eternal family courses over the years, I have taught my students that the most important principle they can use as their guide for making wise dating decisions and

fostering a future lasting marriage is the doctrine of equal partnership. I truly believe this. President Gordon B. Hinckley taught:

*In the marriage companionship there is neither inferiority nor superiority. The woman does not walk ahead of the man; neither does the man walk ahead of the woman. They walk side by side as a son and daughter of God on an eternal journey.*¹³

Within this vision of equal partnership, the most important questions to ask in gauging the marriage worthiness of a dating relationship are, Do we see and treat each other as equal partners? Do we listen to each other? Are we respectful of one another’s opinions—even when we disagree? Do we make decisions together? In evaluating a dating relationship, if your answers to these questions are yes, then you have a good one! At its core, equal partnership is about embracing interdependence and learning to make important life decisions together.

Principle 4—Practicing Virtues Produces Love

In his paradigm-shifting book *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness*, Dr. Blaine Fowers observed what I believe to be one of the most important truisms of marriage. He stated:

*I have become convinced that strong marriages are built on the virtues or character strengths of the spouses. In other words, the best way to have a good marriage is to be a good person.*¹⁴

Marriages are fuller and more resilient as spouses strive to cultivate virtues such as compassion, self-restraint, friendship, generosity, and forgiveness. These virtues can be developed if we foster them with appropriate care and attention and pray for a fuller measure of them through the endowing power of the Savior’s Atonement.

As spouses, we stand on sacred ground with how we respond and react to the shortcomings and imperfections of our spouse, and they in turn to ours. There is something very powerful when spouses are each other’s strongest supporters—when spouses rally to each other’s side rather than

turn away, when they encourage rather than criticize, when they see the best in each other rather than the worst, and when they lift each other up rather than push each other down.

Principle 5—Sincere Discipleship Produces Love

Above all other things, the primary action each of us must do to create love in our relationships is to commit to the daily patterns of sincere discipleship of our Savior Jesus Christ. As I noted earlier, “as I have loved you” is how Christ invites us to love. This invitation presupposes that each of us has felt and is aware of the Lord’s love in our own lives so that we may reflect that love toward others. I share with you my witness of the Lord’s perfect love for you and how much He desires for you to experience His love in personal ways in your own life. I have experienced this deeply in my own life, and I know that His love is both infinite and intimate and that He knows and cares for each of you.

There are two primary ways for each of us to more fully experience Christ’s love: to pray and to follow. First, pray for it. The prophet Mormon pled with us to pray “with all the energy” of our hearts that we “may be filled with this love.” In addition to our personal prayers, there is something very powerful when spouses pray *with* each other and *for* each other. It opens up heaven’s blessings to allow them to see their spouse as God does—and this is the essence of charity.

Second, follow the Savior Jesus Christ. In closing, permit me to return to Elder Holland’s devotional remarks one last time. Elder Holland commended to each of us the only true pattern for securing enduring love in our dating and marriage relationships. He said:

*You want capability, safety, and security in dating and romance, in married life and eternity? Be a true disciple of Jesus. Be a genuine, committed, word-and-deed Latter-day Saint. Believe that your faith has **everything** to do with your romance, because it does. You separate dating from discipleship at your peril. Or, to phrase that*

*more positively, Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, is the only lamp by which you can successfully see the path of love and happiness for you **and** for your sweetheart.*¹⁵

I add my simple testimony to the truthfulness of this divine pattern as well, and I do so in the sacred name of the One who can endow each of us with the fulness of love we desire in our marriage and family relationships, even Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Jeffrey R. Holland, “How Do I Love Thee?” BYU devotional address, 15 February 2000.
2. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), letter 18.
3. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, letter 18.
4. Holland, “How Do I Love Thee?”
5. See Holland, “How Do I Love Thee?”
6. Holland, “How Do I Love Thee?”
7. Holland, “How Do I Love Thee?”; emphasis in original.
8. Lynn G. Robbins, *Love Is a Choice: Making Your Marriage and Family Stronger* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 31.
9. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (1995).
10. See Patricia Noller, “What Is This Thing Called Love? Defining the Love That Supports Marriage and Family,” *Personal Relationships* 3, no. 1 (March 1996): 97–115.
11. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Except the Lord Build the House . . .,” *Ensign*, June 1971.
12. See Bruce C. Hafen, *Covenant Hearts: Marriage and the Joy of Human Love* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 85–90.
13. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Personal Worthiness to Exercise the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, May 2002.
14. Blaine J. Fowers, *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness: How Embracing the Virtues of Loyalty, Generosity, Justice, and Courage Can Strengthen Your Relationship* (New York: John Wiley, 2000), 23.
15. Holland, “How Do I Love Thee?”; emphasis in original.