

# *The Approachable Master: Life's Critical Relationship*

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I came to BYU after a career in advertising, and now I'm enjoying my thirteenth year in a "career crescendo." I don't know what that means to those in music, but I've enjoyed every minute of those thirteen years so far.

The field of sports is a wonderful place to find metaphors and analogies for life, and I would like to begin with one this morning: the phrase "leaving it all on the field," which is to say that one gives everything out there on the playing field, the court, or the stage, holding nothing back. There are times in our lives when this analogy makes particular sense. For example, when serving a mission you would want to make sure that you came home with no regrets, that you "left it all" in your field of labor. There is something awfully satisfying about giving 100 percent, whatever the assignment.

But what if your pre-earth assignment was to come to the playing field of mortality, where there would be forces of opposition trying to keep you from leaving it all on the field? Such is certainly the case with earth life. But how do we then give our all? What can we do to ensure that we leave this life with the fewest possible regrets? For the next few minutes I will discuss one sure way, and that is to come under the influence of the Master—the one perfect

example of someone who indeed left it all on this very playing field.

And so I have titled my remarks this morning "The Approachable Master: Life's Critical Relationship." Let me begin by putting a series of related questions to all of us:

Why is it that we do not befriend with greater intensity our Savior, "The Master of ocean and earth and skies,"<sup>1</sup> at a level that truly affects—perhaps even drives—our own personal behavior?

Said another way, why do we not capitalize on the Spirit of Christ within all of us to more completely comprehend the Master's purpose and the will of the only name under heaven by which we may gain life eternal?<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, why do we not accept more openly the Savior's simple invitation to "come unto me?"

In much the same way President Ezra Taft Benson approached our tendency as a people to undervalue the positive effects of studying the Book of Mormon,<sup>3</sup> may I be bold enough this morning to suggest that the same

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condition may well apply for us as we come to know the Savior. There is so much more to gain by developing a truly interactive relationship with the Master. To use His own parable, could it be that we are the travelers on the highway and that the master has bid us to his wedding feast? Why would we not come?<sup>4</sup>

We can learn of the Master, even love Him for all He has accomplished on our behalf, and yet still position ourselves beyond our own ability to receive many additional and ennobling blessings. It would be like joining a sports team but not going to practice, not benefiting from the coach's experience, and never actually taking the field.

Listen to the Savior's own injunction:

*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

*Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*

*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*<sup>5</sup>

And in our day, the clarion call from the Brethren is an echo from the corridors of time: "Come unto Christ." The reason this call never goes away is because once we are fully engaged with the Master, we become like the people of King Benjamin. After his landmark speech to his people, King Benjamin sent among them, desiring to know if they believed his message and if it had actually made a difference in their lives. Their unified response is an example to all of us:

*Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually.*<sup>6</sup>

As professed Christians and practicing Latter-day Saints, we embrace the doctrines

set forth in the fourth article of faith: the first principle of the gospel is "faith in the Lord Jesus Christ," something that precedes all else. But, sadly, we sometimes become little more than "Facebook friends" with our Lord and Master, clicking our "like" button on Sunday and then only "visiting His page" when we have a special need or when prompted by another Sunday's arrival.

As we exhibit this symbolic behavior, it is possible for us to become our own version of what the apostle Paul described in his discourse on charity "as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps we could change a word or two and make the phrase a more inner-facing interrogative: Have *I* become as a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal?

So again, why is it that we move closer to the Savior on occasion, then drift away, then move closer, then drift away in an undulating kind of relationship, not unlike the movement of the tides?

Let me share some possible reasons why we might stray from a member of the Godhead who is most anxious to befriend us and most ready to receive us, regardless of our present circumstances.

An obvious place to begin is the sometimes subtle but nevertheless diabolically decreed role of the devil and his everlasting commitment to distance us from the influence of the Master. The devil will do all in his power to keep us from developing a strong personal bond with the Master that would strengthen us and guide us safely through the many vicissitudes of life. And let us remember, the further we are from the influence of the Master, the closer we are to the influence of our most formidable foe.

The adversary knows that if he can make us feel alone, even when we aren't, we become much more vulnerable to his very careful, very strategic advances. Here are two of the many strategies he uses to keep us from the Master:

**1. He convinces us that we are unworthy—even through prayer—to enter the presence of the Master.** He does this using the tactics of guilt, shame, or embarrassment, knowing that we “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”<sup>8</sup> Satan reminds us that the Master is perfect and we are not, thus increasing the distance between us and the Savior.

**2. He makes us believe that we can do all things on our own,** that we have no need for the Savior’s help, just as a small child who responds to parental guidance by saying, “I can do it myself.” This is commonly known in LDS parlance as “the pride cycle”—and it’s not a good place for us to find ourselves as adults.

Some years ago, while serving with the missionaries in the Arizona Tucson Mission, I created a series of what my bride, Betty Jo, likes to call “doctrinal diagrams.” The first diagram deals with what I have termed the Drift Phenomenon, where we drift closer and then farther apart from the Lord.

Say you receive a new calling in the Church and are totally overwhelmed. You need the influence of the Master in order to execute your calling. He, of course, responds with the appropriate inspiration, but, as time goes along, you get more comfortable with the calling and your ability to perform it. What may inadvertently happen is that you begin to drift away from the need for constant inspiration and toward a reliance on your own abilities. The theoretical danger zone is when we begin to depend more on ourselves and less on the Spirit. And now, for just a moment, ponder where you might place yourself on these lines in relation to your present Church assignment.

Not that you would ever plan on, or even notice, this shift happening; it just seems to be a part of what King Benjamin might have called “the natural man syndrome”<sup>9</sup>—that tendency to drift away from the Master and His influence when we are not in personal-crisis mode. Once again we become that proverbial three-year-old, saying, or perhaps indignantly

shouting, “I can do it myself.” We are exactly where the adversary would like us to be—out there on our own.

On the other hand, if we “lean not unto [our] own understanding”<sup>10</sup> or on “the arm of flesh,”<sup>11</sup> and as we stay close to the Master’s influence, it is easy to see a dramatic difference. We might call this the Non-Drift Phenomenon or the Magnifying-Your-Calling Phenomenon, where we stay close to the Lord. Imagine the power that can come as you become increasingly proficient in your calling while enjoying an ever-increasing degree of spiritual influence from the Master. To borrow a word from a famous MasterCard advertising campaign, this power is “priceless”—suggesting a value difference between things we can buy (the temporal) and things we cannot buy (the spiritual).

Speaking of temporal things, consider the time and energy we spend at this and perhaps other institutions preparing for and advancing our careers. Let us remember that—unless I miss my guess—our careers will not rise with us in the Resurrection. Certainly I will be unemployed, since I doubt the existence of or need for billboards, TV sets, YouTube, the Internet, or i-anything on the other side of the veil. I trust that even our two surgeon sons may have to look elsewhere for employment.

A very long time ago, as an undergraduate student at BYU, I memorized this quote from Harvard philosopher James Allen that points out the danger of “going it alone”:

*Man is the causer (though nearly always unconsciously) of his [own] circumstances, and that, whilst aiming at a good end, he is continually frustrating its accomplishment by encouraging thoughts and desires which cannot possibly harmonize with that end.*<sup>12</sup>

Making critical life decisions without the aid of the Master’s direct spiritual influence is like embarking on a long sea voyage in a craft without a rudder, a helm, or perhaps even a mast.

Here are three more strategies to add to our list of ways in which the adversary keeps us from developing a broader, deeper, and more critical relationship with our Master:

**3. He creates doubt about our own self-worth and our God-given abilities.**

**4. He gives us a feeling of entitlement.** Since we are all children of God, we are, somehow—amazingly—due a divine inheritance. Someone with the attitude of entitlement says, “It’s never my fault. Surely the blame for my inability to perform to expectations must lie with another. Besides, isn’t the Savior supposed to be my all-time safety net?”

**5. He helps us develop our powers of procrastination** (not that we need help here). After all, there is always and forever tomorrow, right? What could possibly be the rush?

My guess is that at one time or another we have all felt these negative tuggings or feelings in our lives, and we have, to some extent, bought into some of the mortal foibles and frailties with which the adversary is so awfully familiar.

Let me now share a very personal experience from years ago that may serve to illustrate this point. I was set apart as a stake president by two General Authorities, and during the blessing, certain—as I viewed them—promises were mentioned, one of which related to the success of a new business venture I had just undertaken. But things did not go well business-wise. Unbeknownst to me, I had started an advertising agency on the cusp of a serious recession. After weeks of unease, early one morning, with many unanswered questions in my heart, a terrible uncertainty and a feeling of being alone washed over me like a waterfall of doubt. Although going into business for myself seemed like an inspired decision at the time, I had begun to second-guess the rightness of my choice, and I even wondered about the inspired words that had been uttered in that blessing just a few months earlier.

Fortunately I followed a common pattern and went to the scriptures and to the Lord, anxiously looking for answers—*any* answer that would mitigate my vexed state of mind. I was pondering the words in Matthew 28 about the risen Lord, specifically what the angel said to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who were in search of the Master, searching just as I was on that morning and perhaps as you may be searching today: “He is not here: for he is risen, as he said.”<sup>13</sup>

The details of what followed are not important here, except to say that in my scriptures there is written in the margin a little note that says, “Special experience.” The Lord blessed me that day with a powerful witness of the reality of the Savior as my personal advocate with the Father, as the Creator of heaven and earth, and as the would-be Friend of all mankind. Today I testify that He lives and that He wants nothing more than to help us perform well on this playing field of life.

Yes, the business survived the recession and, happily, all the words spoken in my blessing were fulfilled. More important, I learned something about the definition of the phrase “in the Lord’s own way.”

Let’s look more closely into the self-doubt scenario we sometimes find ourselves in—that space between our gospel goals and our actual behavior against those goals. There is an interesting space between where we may be performing now and where we’d like to be. Let’s just call it the “mortal shortfall gap.” This is where many of us get into trouble, allowing self-doubt to creep in and create a series of performance stress risers and debilitating, non-productive thinking. If we are not careful, we succumb to another “flaxen cord”<sup>14</sup> and start to envision the gap widening to the point that we begin to lose faith. Once again we end up exactly where the adversary wants us: solitary and doubtful of our own abilities.

But lest we find this gap troubling, there is good news: the Master also knows full well the

challenges of mortality. And, fortunately, He has both the ability and the predisposition to fill that mortal shortfall gap.

When we fully accept Christ as our personal Savior, Advocate, and Redeemer, the gap fills so completely with hope and understanding and promise that the mortal shortfall gap becomes narrower and narrower until that eventual “perfect day.”<sup>15</sup> Actually, the diminishing effect of our shortfall is the emancipating and empowering effect of the Savior’s Atonement. For our part, a change in attitude or a mighty change of heart<sup>16</sup> to close that gap helps our performance considerably.

Listen to what the ancient and articulate prophet Alma had to say concerning the Atonement:

*And he will take upon him [our] infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.*<sup>17</sup>

And in our day the Savior has spoken to us in the Doctrine and Covenants with these reassuring words: “For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent.”<sup>18</sup>

For a moment now, let’s revisit that potentially devastating alone feeling, a feeling I suppose has come over all of us at one time or another, whether we were physically isolated or perhaps within in a supportive group but still very much alone in our thoughts. This feeling of abject loneliness is another key tactic used by the adversary to create distance between us and our Savior.

Satan would have us believe that no one—not even the Master—can reach us and relate to us on a personal level and feel exactly how we feel in our terribly unique circumstances. But the Master knows, and He feels your *precise* pain and anguish, regardless of its source and intensity. The Savior has vicariously suffered your *exact same suffering*. Paul’s marvelous

discourse on this subject in Hebrews offers “grace to help in [our] time of need.”<sup>19</sup> The last few verses from Hebrews have brought peace and solace to my soul over the years when I have felt particularly alone in this world, even though surrounded by friends:

*For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham.*

*Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.*

*For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.*<sup>20</sup>

*For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.*

*Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.*<sup>21</sup>

I love that invitation: “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace.” Speaking of grace, I for one believe that when it comes to our individual progress toward our goals, vector almost certainly trumps velocity. However long it takes, let us not lose our sense of direction.

Here is one way to look at the Master’s limitless ability to connect to us across the entire spectrum of human emotion: As mortals, we go through life and can experience some pretty low lows and also some pretty high highs. But even though the Savior’s earthly experience was every bit as real and visceral as our own, the Savior is on a scale that supersedes anything the rest of us can possibly encounter. We simply cannot get outside His ability to relate to us personally and individually. Well-meaning friends may offer their best approximate *sympathy*, but only the Savior offers ultimate and absolute *empathy*.

Though I am a teaching professor and not a scientist per se, I love the way the Lord invites us to participate in the scientific process as described by Alma (who just might have been something of a scientist himself). Alma suggested that we experiment on the word in the crucible of the real world:

*But behold, if you will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you.*<sup>22</sup>

Isn't that the way of the scientist and the researcher? They gather all of the empirical evidence—all the data they can—and develop a theory; then they create a repeatable, predictable experiment that proves or disproves the theory.

The Savior, both in His own recorded words and through the words of His holy prophets, has invited us to come unto Him, to experiment for ourselves on the truthfulness of His gospel, and to claim the attendant blessings.

I appreciate so much the Savior's Intercessory Prayer in which He gives us all a glimpse of the possible glory inherent in a relationship with Him—which is a type of the oneness relationship He has with the Father. Let me share a few verses from John.

First, the Savior prayed for His apostles:

*And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are.*<sup>23</sup>

And then He prayed for the rest of us:

*Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word;*

*That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.*<sup>24</sup>

We began this morning with the analogy of leaving it all on the field. How is it possible for us to not only “take the field” of this earthly life but to also come away victorious? I suggest two ways: first, by eschewing the strategic advances of the adversary, and, second, by developing that critical, personal, interactive relationship with the Master.

May we not be found undervaluing the role of the Master, whose arms are outstretched still. We have the opportunity here and now to make Him not just a “Facebook friend” but a most personal, powerful, and influential advocate. Let us not buy into the adversary's attempts to keep us away from the everlasting peace, safety, and eventual exaltation available if we but commend our own personal will into the Lord's all-powerful hands.

I testify of the reality of the living Christ, just as the First Presidency and the Twelve Apostles have declared in a modern-day proclamation.<sup>25</sup> I testify that as we boldly approach Him, our own personal performance becomes our own personal legacy. As we engage with the Master, may we leave it all on the playing field of this life, which is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. “Master, the Tempest Is Raging,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 105.
2. See Moses 6:52.
3. See Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 6, 9, 22.
4. See Matthew 22:1–10.
5. Matthew 11:28–30.
6. Mosiah 5:2.
7. 1 Corinthians 13:1.
8. Romans 3:23.
9. See Mosiah 3:19.
10. Proverbs 3:5.
11. 2 Nephi 4:34.
12. James Allen, *As a Man Thinketh* (New York: Crowell, 1913), 18.

13. Matthew 28:6.
14. 2 Nephi 26:22.
15. D&C 50:24.
16. See Alma 5:12–14.
17. Alma 7:12.
18. D&C 19:16.
19. Hebrews 4:16.
20. Hebrews 2:16–18.
21. Hebrews 4:15–16.
22. Alma 32:27.
23. John 17:11.
24. John 17:20–21.
25. See “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Ensign*, April 2000, 2.