

The Responsibility of Parents

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President Oaks and brothers and sisters, I am grateful for the privilege of meeting with you this morning. I have a matter I would like to discuss with you; I hope you feel, when it's completed, that it's appropriate. I'd like to talk about the responsibility of parents. Many of you young people are already parents, and hopefully the rest of you will be married in one of God's holy temples and become parents in the future.

Sir Winston Churchill once posed this question, "Where does the family start?" and answered, "It starts with a young man falling in love with a girl" (Richard L. Evans, *Richard Evans' Quote Book*, p. 11; hereinafter cited as *Richard Evans' Quote Book*). President David O. McKay once said, "If I were asked to name the world's greatest need, I should say unhesitatingly wise mothers . . . [and] exemplary fathers" (David O. McKay, *Secrets of a Happy Life*, p. 2; hereinafter cited as McKay, *Secrets*). The late Richard L. Evans said, "God has given us no greater blessing than that of belonging to a loving and loyal family—and it will be so, always and forever" (*Richard L. Evans' Quote Book*, p. 24). I wish to discuss your responsibilities as parents and as potential parents. I will primarily use the scriptures as a basis for my message.

Children are an inheritance of the Lord and are therefore precious to him and to their earthly parents. In the days when Moroni presided over the Nephites, there were disputations among them concerning the baptism of their little children. In seeking an answer to this problem, Moroni wrote to his father, Mormon, for counsel. Mormon answered with a letter advising:

And now, my son, I desire that ye should labor diligently, that this gross error should be removed from among you; for, for this intent I have written this epistle.

For immediately after I had learned these things of you I inquired of the Lord concerning the matter. And the word of the Lord came to me by the power of the Holy Ghost, saying:

Listen to the words of Christ, your Redeemer, your Lord and your God. Behold, I came into the world not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance; the whole need no physician, but they that

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are sick; wherefore, little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin; wherefore the curse of Adam is taken from them in me, that it hath no power over them.

And their little children need no repentance, neither baptism. Behold, baptism is unto repentance to the fulfilling the commandments unto the remission of sins.

But little children are alive in Christ, even from the foundation of the world. . . . [Moroni 8:6–8, 11–12]

If children die before reaching the age of accountability, they shall be blessed with eternal life, for the Savior said, “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:16; see also Matthew 19:14, and Mark 10:14). He also said, “Except ye be converted [speaking to adults], and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

The Prophet Joseph Smith received a vision of the celestial kingdom and said, “And I also beheld that all children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven” (Joseph Smith—Vision of the Celestial Kingdom 10).

The Lord also gave the following revelation to Joseph Smith:

Behold, I say unto you, that little children are redeemed from the foundation of the world through mine Only Begotten;

Wherefore, they cannot sin, for power is not given unto Satan to tempt little children, until they begin to become accountable before me. [D&C 29:46–47]

These statements confirm the counsel Mormon gave to his son, Moroni.

Now what do these scriptural statements mean to you? To me, they are very meaningful. They inform parents that they have what we can refer to as “eight golden years,” a time in

the lives of their children when they are not capable of committing sin or being tempted by Satan. Parents have an opportunity to teach and mold the characters of their little children before Satan has the power to tempt them and before they reach the age of eight, becoming then responsible before God. These four scriptures, one from each of the four standard works of the Church, inform us that the Lord has granted parents these precious years, the first years of a child’s life, when the children are not accountable for the things they say and do. It is a responsibility and blessing parents have to teach and train their children to live righteously.

The most effective way to teach righteousness and religion in a home is by example. Hopefully, parents will have kept their own lives sweet and clean and can therefore profitably use the example of their lives in the teaching and training of their own children. “If you would teach faith in God, show faith in Him yourself; if you would teach prayer, pray yourself; would you have them temperate, then you yourself refrain from intemperance; if you would have your child live a life of virtue, of self-control, of good report, then set him a worthy example in all these things” (McKay, *Secrets*, p. 11). To do so will make these teachings more impressive to your children; and they, receiving such guidance from parents, can fortify themselves against the temptations of Satan, whose goal is to destroy their lives when they do reach the age of accountability. Parents have the duty to be what they would have their children become in regard to courtesy, sincerity, temperance, and courage to do right at all times. Example is far more potent than precept.

Daily home life should conform to our Church principles and standards. Our business dealings should agree with our religion. Children are quick to detect insincerity. John Milton said that hypocrisy is the only sin that walks undetected save by God alone. Children,

however, are sensitive to things that are wrong, and they resent insincerity and false pretensions. We know that children are influenced far more by the sermons we live than by the sermons we preach. Parents should always be honest with their children, keeping promises made to them and ever speaking the truth. It is the consistent parent who gains the trust of his child. When a child feels that you honor his trust and reciprocate it, he will not violate it, nor will he bring your name into dishonor.

Children should be taught from their infancy. Elihu Burritt gave this good advice: "Be ever gentle with the children God has given you. Watch over them constantly; reprove them earnestly but not in anger (*Richard Evans' Quote Book*, p. 12). Dr. Lyman Abbott informs us, "Parents have a duty to govern their children, but the object of all good government is to prepare the subject for self-government" (*Richard Evans' Quote Book*, p. 16). Benjamin Franklin advised that the child's first lesson be obedience. It is a real and continuing challenge to parents to prepare themselves to teach their children properly and to help them understand and obey the word of the Lord.

In another revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith the Lord gave the following instructions to parents:

And again, inasmuch as parents have children in Zion, or in any of her stakes which are organized, that teach them not to understand the doctrine of repentance, faith in Christ the Son of the living God, and of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, when eight years old, the sin be upon the heads of the parents.

For this shall be a law unto the inhabitants of Zion, or in any of her stakes which are organized.

And their children shall be baptized for the remission of their sins when eight years old, and receive the laying on of the hands.

And they shall also teach their children to pray, and to walk uprightly before the Lord.

And the inhabitants of Zion shall also observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy. [D&C 68:25–29]

Parents should consistently observe the Sabbath day, keeping it as God's holy day, and refrain from engaging in activities that are contrary to the spirit of the Sabbath. Continual absence from church makes continuous absence easy. Too many outside interests in life can make a growing youth indifferent to religion and its responsibilities. The Lord said, "Now I, the Lord, am not well pleased with the inhabitants of Zion, for . . . their children are . . . growing up in wickedness; they also seek not earnestly the riches of eternity, but their eyes are full of greediness. These things ought not to be, and must be done away from among them." [D&C 68:31]

I know there are many upright, faithful, clean, devoted young people in the Church, but I also know there are many who are not living righteously and are straying from the path God has counseled them to follow. Free agency should be used to choose the right and not the wrong. Free agency is no justification to choose evil. Do you know that as of February 28, 1977, there were 63,988 children nine to nineteen years old who have not been baptized into the Church, and yet one or both parents are Church members? What an indictment against parents who do not follow God's counsel! Many of these children will be forever lost to the Church. Parents will carry the burden of this neglect of duty for not having had their children baptized. The bishops, the home teachers, the Relief Society sisters, and the missionaries can give valuable assistance to help correct this problem.

What a responsibility to parents! Unless they teach their children the principles of the gospel and see that they are baptized, the Lord has said that "the sin be upon the heads of the parents." The Lord did not make it an optional instruction to parents to permit their children to grow up and decide for themselves whether

they should be baptized or not. He made the duty of parents very plain when he said, "For this shall be a law unto the inhabitants of Zion, . . . and their children shall be baptized . . . when eight years old, and receive the laying on of hands." Certainly there is no permissiveness involved in this firm instruction from the Lord. Richard L. Evans said, "The idea that we can leave entirely to children the vital choices of life is unsafe. Leaving such decisions to trial and error is unsafe" (*Richard Evans' Quote Book*, p. 17). Spencer Kinard, in one of his sermonettes given in connection with the national Sunday broadcasts of the Tabernacle Choir, made this interesting and significant observation, "If God had wanted us to be permissive, he would have given us ten suggestions instead of ten commandments."

The laws of life place upon motherhood and fatherhood the responsibility of giving the children not only a good name but training in uprightness. I recommend that following morning and evening prayers, husbands and wives should declare their love for each other. To do so will help establish good family relationships, promote a more ideal home life, and avoid many divorces. Couples should not be married unless they are in love and have like desires and similar goals in the conduct of the home and the upbringing of their children.

Parents should never quarrel in the presence of their children. Sometimes quarrels arise out of an attempt to correct or discipline a child. One parent criticizes; the other objects. And the unified influence of the home, so far as the child is concerned, is nullified. Parents need to be united in knowing which way they want a child to go; otherwise, he may walk in wrong paths out of confusion. Richard L. Evans said, "Division between parents is unfair and confusing and weakens the foundations of the family. Those to whom a child should look for guidance must be united in the guidance they give" (*Richard L. Evans' Quote Book*, p. 23). We know that children are sensitive to family

moods and feelings; they can feel tensions and differences that they can't always understand or define.

Parents who participate in or permit cursing or the use of profanity in the home are particularly delinquent. Parents pollute their homes when they use such vile language and evils that lower the standards of an ideal home.

The family gives to the child his name and standing in the community. A child wants his family to be as good as those of his friends. He wants to be able to point with pride to his father and always to feel inspiration when he thinks of his mother. It is the mother's duty to so live that her children will associate her with everything that is good and beautiful. And the father should live his life in such a way that his children can emulate his example, living as good citizens of both church and community.

A child has the right to feel that in his home he has a place of refuge, a place of protection from the dangers and evils of the outside world. Family unity and integrity are necessary to supply this need. There is no place other than the home where true and lasting happiness can be found in this life. It is possible to make home a bit of heaven; indeed, I picture heaven to be a continuation of the ideal home life here on earth.

One of the most important things a father can do for his children is to love their mother. It has been said that marriage is a fine and sacred thing if you make it so. In regard to his sense of security, every child is entitled to food, shelter, and raiment, and he should also feel safe and comfortable protection within his home. The satisfaction of certain material and cultural needs is also important to a successful home life. Parents must magnify their talents in order to broaden their teachings to their children and meet these special needs.

In addition to being responsible for teaching their children the first principles of the gospel, parents are also counseled to "teach their children to pray, and to walk uprightly

before the Lord.” What a delight it is to me when I attend stake conferences and stay in the home of the stake president and have him call on one of his children to be voice in family prayer! These children are capable of giving beautiful and spiritual prayers, despite the presence of a stranger in their home. Ofttimes I also see a family gather around the table in the dining room or breakfast room to read, ponder, and discuss the scriptures. Each family member takes his or her turn in the study and discussion of the scriptures.

A mother needs to choose which activities should take priority during each season of her life: for example, while she has small children at home, wisdom would dictate that she limit outside activities, no matter how worthwhile they may be. The story of Emmeline B. Wells, an early Utah Latter-day Saint mother, reflects the power of a life covered by wise recognition of values. While her children were young, she devoted herself almost exclusively to her home and children. A natural and skillful teacher, she instilled into her children her staunch faith in the gospel and the Church and her love of the good and beautiful in life.

The Lord gives additional instruction to parents, found in the 93rd section of the Doctrine and Covenants, verses 36 and 37, beginning, “The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth. Light and truth forsake that evil one.” “Light and truth forsake that evil one”; this statement is very meaningful. One who, by true faith, diligence, and prayer, obtains the light and truth of the gospel in his life will forsake all evil.

The Lord continues by saying:

Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning; and God having redeemed man from the fall, men became again, in their infant state, innocent before God.

And that wicked one cometh and taketh away light and truth, through disobedience, from the

children of men, and because of the tradition of their fathers. [D&C 93:38–39]

This scripture informs us that man was innocent in the beginning, but when we reach the age of accountability, “that wicked one cometh and taketh away light and truth, through disobedience, from the children of men, and because of the tradition of their fathers.” We must be careful to build good and righteous traditions in families. Parents, directed by the father of the home, have that responsibility and should give it thoughtful consideration.

The Lord continues by saying, “But I have commanded you to bring up your children in light and truth” (D&C 93:40). Again, this is a charge and not a choice. It is a responsibility parents cannot escape, as the following scripture indicates. The Lord, through the Prophet Joseph Smith, said to Frederick G. Williams:

You have continued under this condemnation; you have not taught your children light and truth, according to the commandments; and that wicked one hath power, as yet, over you, and this is the cause of your affliction.

And now a commandment I give unto you—if you will be delivered you shall set in order your own house, for there are many things that are not right in your house. [D&C 93:41–43]

If children go wrong, is it because parents have failed to bring them up in the light and truth of the gospel? I realize that occasionally there is one in the best of families who may go astray, but the majority of those brought up in light and truth in an ideal Latter-day Saint home do not yield to the temptations of evil. If we do our part as parents in teaching righteous principles, setting proper examples, and giving love and security, we fulfill our responsibility.

You remember the Lord said to Frederick G. Williams, “You have continued under this condemnation; you have not taught your children

light and truth, according to the commandments; and that wicked one hath power, as yet, over you, and this is the cause of your affliction." When the Lord said to "set in order your own house," I don't think he had in mind the physical orderliness of the home, although he had counseled both as being important. He said, "Set in order your houses; keep slothfulness and uncleanness far from you" (D&C 90:18). And cleanliness is next to godliness. But it is the spiritual orderliness of the home our Heavenly Father is mostly concerned about. A son or daughter of a family who faithfully holds the weekly family home evening is blessed in many ways. A missionary from such a home has a definite advantage, for it is now the goal of missionaries, and will continue to be in the future, to concentrate on converting complete families. In order for missionaries working with families to be really successful, they must be capable of organizing and carrying out a family home evening program, and must understand the importance of a family doing things together on an organized basis. We are taught in our family home evenings that families can be eternal—living, loving, and progressing forever by obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Following the Lord's reprimand to Frederick G. Williams, the Lord upbraided Sidney Rigdon by saying that "in some things he hath not kept the commandments concerning his children; therefore, first set in order thy house" (D&C 93:44). And the Prophet Joseph Smith also received a rebuke and warning from the Lord because of a laxity in governing his family. He was reprimanded by the Lord, who said, "Your family must needs repent and forsake some things, and give more earnest heed unto your sayings, or be removed out of their place" (D&C 93:48). Later, they were removed out of their place, as the records show. The Presiding Bishop of the Church, Newel K. Whitney, was also chastened by the Lord through the Prophet: "[He] hath need to be

chastened, and set in order his family, and see that they are more diligent and concerned at home, and pray always, or they shall be removed out of their place" (D&C 93:50).

In closing these admonitions to the then First Presidency of the restored Church, the Lord applied these instructions to all by saying, "What I say unto one I say unto all; pray always lest that wicked one have power in you, and remove you out of your place" (D&C 93:49). These revelations emphasize that all of us need to reassess ourselves and our families to see if we are fulfilling our responsibilities to them.

A well-known psychologist has penned the following wise prayer: "Dear Lord, make me a better parent. Teach me to understand my children, to listen patiently to what they have to say, and to answer all their questions kindly. Keep me from interrupting them, talking back to and contradicting them. Make me as courteous to them as I would have them be to me" (*Richard Evans' Quote Book*, p. 26).

Our beloved President Spencer W. Kimball gave some very good counsel when he spoke to approximately 8,000 in the Tangerine Bowl Stadium in Orlando, Florida, recently. He said, "Nothing can renew the soul, and give youthfulness to the spirit like a home in which there is love and respect for each other, where there is faith in our Heavenly Father, and prayers to him both individually and as a family." President Kimball also said,

The family is the most important institution in the world. A happy home is not only heaven on earth, but it is the strength of the nation. [it is also the strength of the Church.] A people, a nation, cannot be great without happy, strong homes.

In the home is where this great country must do some strengthening if it is to achieve its divine destiny. [Church News, Deseret News, December 25, 1976, p. 3]

I pray that this message will be helpful to all of you who are married, and to those of you who are not yet married. Young people, begin now to prepare for the most important responsibility you will have. Read, study, and plan for this responsibility. I suggest that all young couples and all unmarried young men and women read and ponder *Secrets of a Happy Life*, a book by President David O. McKay, and *Richard Evans' Quote Book*, first chapter, entitled, "Home, Marriage, Mothers, Fathers, and Families." The counsel the Lord has given can be very helpful to a happy home and family life.

The gospel as we teach it is true. Christ lives; God lives, and glorious mansions are being prepared above for all his faithful and devoted children. Plan now the kind of home and family you desire, and how you will meet the needs of your children to keep them on a righteous path that will lead the family to eternal life in a celestial home. God bless all of you, my brothers and sisters. I think you can understand that much of what has been said pertains to you. And to organize and carry forward your home in a sacred manner is very important to the young people who come to bless your life. God bless you, I humbly pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.