

“It Is Not Good That . . . Man Should Be Alone”

KEVIN J WORTHEN

My message today is summarized in a familiar scripture, Genesis 2:18, in which the Lord declared, “It is not good that . . . man should be alone.” I suppose most of you upon hearing this will think that I am about to deliver the standard BYU speech on marriage. You are wrong—well, at least mostly wrong. Although the principles I address will apply with full force to marriage, I wish to speak about a broader truth, one recognized in both secular studies and gospel teaching. It is that no one can flourish in isolation and that the quality of our relationships with others will ultimately determine our level of fulfillment and happiness in both this mortal existence and the life to come. It is in this sense that it is not good for man—or woman—to be alone.

I learned this insight from an unexpected source about twenty years ago. I was helping teach a class at the University of Chile about that country’s law dealing with indigenous people. Members of the class included not only law students but also a number of leaders of indigenous communities, principally Mapuche communities from southern Chile. Each week after the regular class, these Mapuche leaders would teach the students—and the professors—various aspects of

Mapuche culture. On one occasion the topic was Mapuche cosmology, or religion.

One Mapuche leader began the discussion by noting that the Mapuche understanding of the meaning of life was quite different from that of the traditional Western world and that that difference could be summarized in part by differences in the Mapuche understanding of the nature of God and the devil. He explained that while the traditional Christian belief was that God was a single, solitary person, Mapuche belief was that the principal deity consisted of four individuals: an older man, an older woman, a younger man, and a younger woman. He explained that to him this was a much more logical view of the world, as everyone knew that happiness can exist only if we share it with other people. By contrast, he noted, the principal evil spirit in the Mapuche cosmology existed all by himself. And that was what made him evil. His eternal destiny was to be alone, and it was his loneliness that made him so angry and destructive.

Kevin J Worthen was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 5 January 2016.

There is some disagreement among scholars as to the accuracy of this community leader's view of Mapuche religion,¹ but his insight about the effect of being alone in the world draws support from other disciplines. As Martin E. P. Seligman reported, "Social neuroscientist John Cacioppo has argued [that] loneliness is such a disabling condition that it [is clear] that the pursuit of relationships is a rock-bottom fundamental to human well-being."²

Now I am fully aware that there are times when we want to be by ourselves; when we have to get away from others; when our roommates, classmates, brothers and sisters, and others just drive us crazy. All of us can relate, at one time or another, to the character in Jean Paul Sartre's play *No Exit* when he observed that "hell is other people."³ But in the long run, the converse is also true—heaven is other people. Heaven will be heaven because of the other people who will be there. And experiencing heaven on earth will ultimately depend, to a large degree, on the quality of our relationships with others.

This truth has been recognized by a number of different people approaching the issue from a number of different perspectives. In 2002 Dr. Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology, published a book entitled *Authentic Happiness*, in which he set forth his ideas about how people could achieve the maximum amount of human satisfaction and happiness. Nine years later he wrote another book entitled *Flourish*, in which he explained that his prior theory was incomplete. Among the missing elements—among the short list of things that people must have in order to truly flourish, according to Seligman—are positive relationships. Seligman explained:

Very little that is positive is solitary. When was the last time you laughed uproariously? The last time you felt indescribable joy? The last time you sensed profound meaning and purpose? The last

*time you felt enormously proud of an accomplishment? Even without knowing the particulars of these high points of your life, I know their form: all of them took place around other people.*⁴

Think about it. Whenever we experience something truly good in our lives, that feeling is enhanced when we share it with others—either in the very moment or at some future time. That is a universal truth. When Lehi partook of the fruit of the tree of life and found that "it filled [his] soul with exceedingly great joy," his first desire was "that [his] family should partake of it also."⁵ Lehi understood implicitly that he could not experience a fulness of joy by himself. His happiness could not be complete unless he could somehow share it with those he loved.

To a large extent, the depth of our eternal happiness will be determined by the quality of our relationships with others. The clear fact is, no one will be exalted by him- or herself.⁶ Thus one of the purposes of this mortal existence—and therefore one of the purposes of your education at this university—is to develop both the skills and the attributes necessary to establish long-lasting, joyful relationships.

That truth is reflected in the manner in which the Church is organized. As Elder Marlin K. Jensen once noted:

The Church builds meetinghouses, not hermitages.

From the beginning of the Restoration, the command has been for us to gather in communities, where we can learn to live in harmony and mutually support one another by honoring our baptismal covenants. . . .

*. . . The inspired organization of the Church . . . provides settings where we can develop socially. In Church callings, meetings, classes, quorums, councils, activities, and a variety of other opportunities for association, we develop the attributes and social skills that help prepare us for the social order that will exist in heaven.*⁷

Indeed, our very concept of heaven is shaped by the notion of relationships. The authors of the *Ilds.org* Gospel Topics essay on “Becoming Like God” explain:

*Church members imagine exaltation less through images of what they will get and more through the relationships they have now and how those relationships might be purified and elevated.*⁸

Latter-day scripture teaches the same message. In section 130 in the Doctrine and Covenants we read:

*That same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy.*⁹

That scripture contains both a promise and a warning. The promise is that if we develop positive relationships during this mortal life and keep the commandments, those relationships will not end at death. Indeed, they will be enhanced. We will not only enjoy that same “sociality” in the world to come but it will then “be coupled with eternal glory,” thereby increasing both the temporal duration and the quality of those relationships.

But there is also a warning in the scripture. If we fail to develop positive relationships in this life, they will not suddenly spring into existence in the next life. We will experience the “same sociality” in the next life as we did in this life. If we have done nothing to create eternal relationships during our mortal existence, we will not have any in the next phase—to our eternal sorrow.

Thus my New Year’s plea is that in this coming year we all increase the number and quality of eternal relationships that exist in our lives. Yes, that includes marriage relationships for those who are married or are striving for that. But it also includes other relationships—relationships with our roommates, our classmates, our teachers, our other family members,

and even strangers in the community. Let me provide four suggestions on how to accomplish this goal.

First, look for and take advantage of opportunities to develop positive relationships with others. These can be found in every aspect of your everyday life at the university. As already noted, the Church itself is organized in ways that present such opportunities. One of the distinguishing factors of the Church is its organization along geographic boundaries. Belonging to a ward organized in this fashion requires us to interact with people with whom, if left to ourselves, we would not otherwise associate. If you are from Los Angeles, being part of a ward may force you to meet and get to know someone you think is a “narrow-minded” Utah Mormon. If you are from Panguitch, it may cause you to get to know someone you may perceive as a “liberal” Mormon from New York. More important, being in a ward gives you opportunities to not only know them but to serve them and, consequently, to love them.

Similar opportunities can be found in your school life. You are here with a remarkable group of fellow students. Take time to get to know them. Take time to get to know your faculty members. They too are remarkable. Some of them can become not only mentors but lifelong and eternal friends.

Most of you will also interact with coworkers, either on or off campus. Get to know them; look for ways to serve them.

As you look for those opportunities, pay particular attention to those who struggle to feel included—those who are on the margins of the group, either physically or emotionally. Their loneliness may not be obvious, but with spiritual sensitivity it can be discerned. They will be blessed by your efforts. Just as important, you will be blessed and changed as well.

The BYU mission statement states that the first major educational goal for BYU is that “all students at BYU should be taught the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ But like all the

educational goals at BYU, that charge is not limited to the acquisition of abstract theoretical knowledge. The mission statement goes on to indicate that “all relationships within the BYU community should reflect devout love of God and a loving, genuine concern for the welfare of our neighbor.”¹¹ Note the inclusive and active nature of that charge. *All* our relationships—those at Church, school, work, home, or anywhere else—are to reflect the Savior’s love. And that love is to include “a loving, genuine concern”—an active concern for all of those with whom we interact.

There are few aspects of your education here that present more—and more meaningful—opportunities to meet President Henry B. Eyring’s challenge that we be “learners and lifters” at this university than to be actively concerned about the welfare of our neighbor.¹²

And let us not repeat the error of the lawyer who during Jesus’s time attempted to narrowly define who those neighbors are. The Savior’s response to the lawyer’s efforts was the parable of the good Samaritan, which makes it abundantly clear that our neighbors include not only our fellow BYU students but also all those with whom we interact within our broader community, whether they be local merchants or fans from other schools with whom we compete athletically. One of the few sad tasks of my role as president of this university is to receive letters from store owners, landlords, or visitors to our campus whose interaction with a very small minority of our university community have left them wondering how we can possibly call ourselves disciples of Christ. I don’t receive many of those letters, but even one or two demonstrate that we have room for improvement. Please treat others with the respect they deserve.

That leads to my second suggestion. As we expand the group of people with whom we consciously seek to develop positive relationships, let us also expand our vision of who they really are. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” clearly states:

*All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.*¹³

Note the universality of the words *all* and *each*. Everyone with whom we interact—even those with whom we disagree completely on fundamental issues of truth—is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents. And we need to treat them as such, even when we cannot otherwise agree with them on anything else.

That same principle applies with particularity to those whom we love the most—our spouses and other family members. In that regard we would do well to reflect upon C. S. Lewis’s astute observation:

*It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. . . . There are no **ordinary** people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. . . . It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.*¹⁴

If we remember the nature of the beings with whom we interact, we are more likely to avoid two of the primary impediments to positive and eternal relationships in our digital age: distraction and anonymity. The former is evident when we divide our attention between those with whom we are physically present and those with whom we simultaneously interact online through texts and other messages. Surely if we were to be granted a personal audience with Heavenly Father, we would not take out our phones to check to see if someone else was trying to reach us electronically. If we remember the divine potential of all those with whom we interact, it may cause us to be more fully present and engaged with them when they are in our presence, rather than

giving them only part of our attention, with the remainder reserved for our cell phone.

At the other extreme, the anonymity of some social media platforms causes us to say things that we would never say to a divine being in person. Please keep in mind that what we communicate can wound one of God's children, even when the source of that hurt is not revealed. Let all our interactions reflect the profound truth that we do live in a society of potential gods and goddesses.

Third, we should develop our ability to take joy in the success of others. One of the opportunities—or challenges—in life comes when our peers achieve something that we had hoped to achieve for ourselves. How do we respond when it is our fellow study group member who gets the A instead of us? Or when our roommate is the one who gets asked out on a date while we sit at home alone? Or when a classmate gets the part in the play we had hoped to receive? At such times our natural reaction—or, better stated, the reaction of the natural man—is to feel envious and jealous. Such feelings destroy relationships.

By contrast, responding positively in such circumstances strengthens our relationships in a productive and eternal way. Psychological studies have shown that “when an individual responds . . . constructively . . . to someone sharing a positive experience, love and friendship [between them] increase.”¹⁵ When we share in the joy of others, we not only come closer to them, but we lift our spirits as well.

The ability to truly take joy in the success of others—and to communicate that joy to them—is a key attribute of a celestial life. Think about it. God's greatest joy comes through the accomplishment of others. His work and glory is to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of others.¹⁶ His ultimate happiness comes through His enjoyment of our success. By contrast, Satan's desire is that others fail. That is what he enjoys. He is frustrated when others succeed. Thus how we respond to the success of others

may be a telling measure of not only our ability to create eternal relationships but also what our ultimate destiny may be.

This can be seen in two contrasting scenes from the Book of Mormon. In 1 Nephi 17, note how Laman and Lemuel responded to the frustrations of their brother Nephi as he attempted to construct a ship without their help. As Nephi recorded, “Now when [my brethren] saw that I began to be sorrowful they were glad in their hearts.”¹⁷ Laman and Lemuel rejoiced because their brother was sad. They celebrated his failure. There is a word for this kind of reaction: *schadenfreude*, which means to maliciously take joy in the misfortune of others.¹⁸ Schadenfreude is a common attitude in our world today—whether it be with respect to grades or sports or popularity. As one commentator noted, “We Americans love putting people up on pedestals and we love taking them down.”¹⁹ Such behavior is not a good thing for them or for us.²⁰

Contrast Laman and Lemuel's reaction to Nephi's sorrow with that of the people of Alma the Elder, whose covenantal desire was “to mourn with those that mourn . . . and comfort those that stand in need of comfort.”²¹ How we respond to both the successes and the struggles of others provides a measure of both the nature of our relationship with them and the extent to which we are becoming like our Heavenly Father.

I know this is asking a lot. I am asking you to become more of a Zion society—one in which we are “of one heart and one mind.”²² The scriptures indicate that the Lord is “well pleased that there should be a school in Zion.”²³ I think that He would be equally well pleased if there was a little more Zion in His school. If we can make progress in that realm, we will be happier and more fulfilled.

With that aspiration in mind, let me add a caveat. Positive eternal relationships come at a price. To truly love others, we have to become vulnerable in new ways. Our very love and concern for others means that we will be affected

by their actions and circumstances in ways that at times will be soul stretching. It affects us more when they do not respond positively to our efforts to reach out to them. And we are wounded more deeply when they fail in their efforts. God Himself wept when He witnessed the struggles and failures of His children.²⁴ Similarly, implicit in the covenant to bear one another's burdens and to mourn with those who mourn is the certainty that if we love to that degree, we will more often have sorrow—for others. The choice to love others necessarily includes the choice to experience new and profound emotions of all kinds, both positive and negative. But the result is worth the price.

Finally, if we are to develop positive and eternal relationships with others, we must first develop a positive and eternal relationship with our Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ. As Elder Charles Didier explained:

*One of the real purposes of life is to become a friend of the Mediator, our Savior and Redeemer, . . . and then qualify to be called his friend.*²⁵

Like other positive relationships, this eternal relationship comes at a price, but one largely paid by the Savior in Gethsemane and on the cross. As a result of His great and infinite atoning sacrifice, Christ is able, with total empathy, to mourn with us in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. He has paid the ultimate price for ultimate friendship. Just as we sometimes get to know God through our extremities,²⁶ Christ became fully acquainted with us through His extremities as part of the Atonement.²⁷ As a result, He can teach and lift us as no one else can.

In the long run there is a connection between our relationships with others and our relationship with Heavenly Father and Christ. Elder Marlin K. Jensen observed that “the quality of our daily relationships with others is the best indication of what we think about Christ.”²⁸ I believe the Lord takes much more literally

than we may think His observation that “inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”²⁹ Because of His great love for all of God's children, and as a result of the intimate and infinite nature of His great atoning sacrifice, Christ is personally affected—either negatively or positively—by the way we treat every single person with whom we come in contact. Thus the quality of our relationship with Him will depend to a great degree on the quality of our relationships with others.

If we are more mindful of those relationships, if we do our best to reach out to others in ways that lift them, if we treat them as the potentially divine beings they are, and if their joys and sorrows become our joys and sorrows, then our lives will be more productive and more joyful. We will be filled with the love of Christ, and we will grow closer to Him, with the promise “that when he shall appear we shall be like him.”³⁰ Of this I testify, in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. There is general consensus that the principle Mapuche deity consists of an ancient couple (sometimes called the Divine Couple and considered a married couple) often joined by a younger couple, and all together they are sometimes referred to as the Divine Family. See, e.g., Ramón Francisco Curivil Paillavil, *La fuerza de la religión de la tierra: Una herencia de nuestros antepasados* (Santiago, Chile: Ediciones UCSH, 2007), 75; also, see page 12 of Ana Mariella Bacigalupo, “Rituales de género para el orden cósmico: Luchas chamánicas mapuche por la totalidad,” *Scripta Ethnologica* 26 (2004): 9–38, redalyc.org/pdf/148/14802601.pdf. However, as one author observed, the concept of a single evil being is much less consistent: “Missionaries are tempted to equate the forces of evil with Satan in his several guises, a logic which the Mapuche are able to understand but one to which they give no credence or at least

no importance, considering the white man to be wrong" (Louis C. Faron, *The Mapuche Indians of Chile* [New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968], 65).

2. Martin E. P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 21; citing John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

3. Garcin, in Jean Paul Sartre, *Huis Clos* (*No Exit or In Camera*, 1945), scene 5; see also Kirk Woodward, "The Most Famous Thing Jean-Paul Sartre Never Said," 9 July 2010, *Rick on Theater* (blog), rickontheater.blogspot.com/2010/07/most-famous-thing-jean-paul-sartre.html.

4. Seligman, *Flourish*, 20; emphasis added; see also Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

5. 1 Nephi 8:12.

6. See, e.g., 1 Corinthians 11:11; D&C 128:15.

7. Marlin K. Jensen, "Lessons from the Sacred Grove," *Ensign*, December 2014.

8. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Gospel Topics page, "Becoming Like God," [lds.org/topics/becoming-like-god?lang=eng](https://www.lds.org/topics/becoming-like-god?lang=eng); emphasis in original.

9. D&C 130:2.

10. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 2014), 1.

11. *Mission and Aims*, 1–2.

12. Henry B. Eyring, "A Leader of Learners," BYU address at the inauguration of President Kevin J Worthen, 9 September 2014; see also Kevin J Worthen, "A Vibrant and Determined Community of Learners and Lifters," BYU annual university conference address, 24 August 2015.

13. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, November 1995.

14. C. S. Lewis, last paragraph of "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and*

Other Addresses (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 14–15; emphasis in original.

15. Seligman, *Flourish*, 173; citing Shelly L. Gable, Harry T. Reis, Emily A. Impett, and Evan R. Asher, "What Do You Do When Things Go Right? The Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Benefits of Sharing Positive Events," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 87, no. 2 (2004): 228–45.

16. See Moses 1:39.

17. 1 Nephi 17:19.

18. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Schadenfreude" ("malicious enjoyment of the misfortunes of others"), [oed.com/view/Entry/172271](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/172271).

19. John Portmann, quoted in Warren St. John, "Sorrow So Sweet: A Guilty Pleasure in Another's Woe," *New York Times*, Arts section, 24 August 2002; see John Portmann, *When Bad Things Happen to Other People* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

20. One study showed "that people with low self-esteem experience more schadenfreude toward the misfortune of a high-achiever than those with high self-esteem" (Wilco W. van Dijk, Guido M. van Koningsbruggen, Jaap W. Ouwerkerk, and Yoka M. Wesseling, "Self-Esteem, Self-Affirmation, and Schadenfreude," *Emotion* 11, no. 6 [2011]: 1448). Another study suggested "that envy predicts *Schadenfreude* when people are confronted with the misfortune of a relevant social comparison other" (Wilco W. van Dijk, Jaap W. Ouwerkerk, Sjoerd Goslinga, Myrke Nieweg, and Marcello Gallucci, "When People Fall from Grace: Reconsidering the Role of Envy in *Schadenfreude*," *Emotion* 6, no. 1 [2006]: 156).

21. Mosiah 18:9.

22. Moses 7:18.

23. D&C 97:3.

24. See Moses 7:28–40.

25. Charles Didier, "Friend or Foe," *Ensign*, November 1983.

26. See Bruce C. Hafen, "The Atonement: All for All," *Ensign*, May 2004; see also chapter 6

of *Our Heritage: A Brief History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996), 69–80. One of the survivors of the Martin handcart company stated, “[We] came through with the absolute knowledge that God lives, for we became acquainted with him in our extremities” (William R. Palmer, “Pioneers of Southern Utah: VI. Francis Webster,” *Instructor* 79, no. 5 (May 1944): 217–18; see also David O. McKay, “Pioneer Women,” *Relief Society Magazine*, January 1948, 8; also quoted in *Our Heritage*, 78).

27. See, e.g., Mosiah 14:10; Alma 7:11–12; D&C 88:6.

28. Marlin K. Jensen, “Answering God’s Interrogatories,” in Galen L. Fletcher and Jane H. Wise, eds., *Life in the Law: Answering God’s Interrogatories* (Provo: J. Reuben Clark Law Society, BYU Law School, 2002), 6; originally published as “Where Art Thou?: Answering God’s Interrogatories,” *Clark Memorandum*, fall 1997, 2–7.

29. Matthew 25:40.

30. Moroni 7:48.