

# The Great Commandment

**Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin**  
**Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles**

Joseph B. Wirthlin, “The Great Commandment,” *Ensign*, Nov 2007, 28–31  
*When we reach out to assist the least of Heavenly Father’s children, we do it unto Him.*

Brethren and sisters, I would like to ask one very important question. What quality defines us best as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

Today I would like to speak about the answer to this question.

In the first century a.d., members of the growing Church in Corinth were enthusiastic about the gospel. Almost all were recent converts to the Church. Many were attracted to it through the preaching of the Apostle Paul and others.

But the Saints at Corinth were also contentious. They argued amongst themselves. Some felt superior to others. They took each other to court.

When Paul heard this, feeling a sense of frustration, he wrote them a letter, pleading with them to become more unified. He answered many of the questions they had been arguing about. Then, toward the end, he told them that he wanted to show them “a more excellent way.”<sup>1</sup>

Do you remember the words he wrote next?

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity,” he told them, “I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul’s message to this new body of Saints was simple and direct: Nothing you do makes much of a difference if you do not have charity. You can speak with tongues, have the gift of prophecy, understand all mysteries, and possess all knowledge; even if you have the faith to move mountains, without charity it won’t profit you at all.<sup>3</sup>

“Charity is the pure love of Christ.”<sup>4</sup> The Savior exemplified that love and taught it even as He was tormented by those who despised and hated Him.

On one occasion the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus by asking Him a seemingly impossible question: “Master,” they asked, “which is the great commandment in the law?”<sup>5</sup>

The Pharisees had debated this question extensively and had identified more than 600 commandments.<sup>6</sup> If prioritizing them was such a difficult task for scholars, certainly they thought the question would be impossible for this son of a carpenter from Galilee.

But when the Pharisees heard His answer, they must have been troubled, for it pointed to their great weakness. He replied:

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

“This is the first and great commandment.

“And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”<sup>7</sup>

Since that day, this inspired pronouncement has been repeated through many generations. Now, for us, the measure of our love is the measure of the greatness of our souls.

The scriptures tell us that “if any man love God, the same is known of him.”<sup>8</sup> What a wonderful promise—to be known of Him. It makes the spirit soar to think that the Creator of heaven and earth could know us and love us with a pure, eternal love.

In 1840 the Prophet Joseph sent an epistle to the Twelve wherein he taught that “love is one of the chief characteristics of Deity, and ought to be manifested by those who aspire to be the sons of God. A man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole world, anxious to bless the whole human race.”<sup>9</sup>

As we reach out in love to those around us, we fulfill the other half of the great commandment to “love thy neighbour as thyself.”<sup>10</sup>

Both commandments are necessary, for as we bear one another’s burdens, we fulfill the law of Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Love is the beginning, the middle, and the end of the pathway of discipleship. It comforts, counsels, cures, and consoles. It leads us through valleys of darkness and through the veil of death. In the end love leads us to the glory and grandeur of eternal life.

For me, the Prophet Joseph Smith has always exemplified the pure love of Christ. Many asked why he gained so many followers and retained them. His answer: “It is because I possess the principle of love.”<sup>12</sup>

The story is told of a 14-year-old boy who had come to Nauvoo in search of his brother who lived near there. The young boy had arrived in winter with no money and no friends. When he inquired about his brother, the boy was taken to a large house that looked like a hotel. There he met a man who said, “Come in, son, we’ll take care of you.”

The boy accepted and was brought into the house, where he was fed, warmed, and was given a bed to sleep in.

The next day it was bitter cold, but in spite of that, the boy prepared himself to walk the eight miles to where his brother was staying.

When the man of the house saw this, he told the young boy to stay for a while. He said there would be a team coming soon and that he could ride back with them.

When the boy protested, saying that he had no money, the man told him not to worry about that, that they would take care of him.

Later the boy learned that the man of the house was none other than Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet. This boy remembered this act of charity for the rest of his life.<sup>13</sup>

In a recent message of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's *Music and the Spoken Word*, a story was told about an elderly man and woman who had been married for many decades. Because the wife was slowly losing her sight, she could no longer take care of herself the way she had done for so many years. Without being asked, the husband began to paint her fingernails for her.

“He knew that she could see her fingernails when she held them close to her eyes, at just the right angle, and they made her smile. He liked to see her happy, so he kept painting her nails for more than five years before she passed away.”<sup>14</sup>

That is an example of the pure love of Christ. Sometimes the greatest love is not found in the dramatic scenes that poets and writers immortalize. Often, the greatest manifestations of love are the simple acts of kindness and caring we extend to those we meet along the path of life.

True love lasts forever. It is eternally patient and forgiving. It believes, hopes, and endures all things. That is the love our Heavenly Father bears for us.

We all yearn to experience love like this. Even when we make mistakes, we hope others will love us in spite of our shortcomings—even if we don't deserve it.

Oh, it is wonderful to know that our Heavenly Father loves us—even with all our flaws! His love is such that even should we give up on ourselves, He never will.

We see ourselves in terms of yesterday and today. Our Heavenly Father sees us in terms of forever. Although we might settle for less, Heavenly Father won't, for He sees us as the glorious beings we are capable of becoming.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of transformation. It takes us as men and women of the earth and refines us into men and women for the eternities.

The means of this refinement is our Christlike love. There is no pain it cannot soften, no bitterness it cannot remove, no hatred it cannot alter. The Greek playwright Sophocles wrote: “One word frees us of all the weight and pain of life: That word is love.”<sup>15</sup>

The most cherished and sacred moments of our lives are those filled with the spirit of love. The greater the measure of our love, the greater is our joy. In the end, the development of such love is the true measure of success in life.

Do you love the Lord?

Spend time with Him. Meditate on His words. Take His yoke upon you. Seek to understand and obey, because “this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.”<sup>16</sup> When we love the Lord, obedience ceases to be a burden. Obedience becomes a delight. When we love the Lord, we seek less for things that benefit us and turn our hearts toward things that will bless and uplift others.

As our love for the Lord deepens, our minds and hearts become purified. We experience a “mighty change in ... our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually.”<sup>17</sup>

Brethren and sisters, as you prayerfully consider what you can do to increase harmony, spirituality, and build up the kingdom of God, consider your sacred duty to teach others to love the Lord and their fellowman. This is the central object of our existence. Without charity—or the pure love of Christ—whatever else we accomplish matters little. With it, all else becomes vibrant and alive.

When we inspire and teach others to fill their hearts with love, obedience flows from the inside out in voluntary acts of self-sacrifice and service. Yes, those who go home teaching out of duty, for example, may fulfill their obligation. But those who home teach out of genuine love for the Lord and for their fellowman will likely approach that task with a very different attitude.

Returning to my original question, What quality defines us best as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? I would answer: we are a people who love the Lord with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and we love our neighbors as ourselves.

That is our signature as a people. It is like a beacon to the world, signaling whose disciples we are.<sup>18</sup>

At the final day the Savior will not ask about the nature of our callings. He will not inquire about our material possessions or fame. He will ask if we ministered to the sick, gave food and drink to the hungry, visited those in prison, or gave succor to the weak.<sup>19</sup> When we reach out to assist the least of Heavenly Father’s children, we do it unto Him.<sup>20</sup> That is the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If we wish to learn truly how to love, all we need to do is reflect on the life of our Savior. When we partake of the sacramental emblems, we are reminded of the greatest example of love in all the world’s history. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.”<sup>21</sup>

The Savior’s love for us was so great that it caused “even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore.”<sup>22</sup>

Because the Savior laid down His life for us,<sup>23</sup> we have a brightness of hope, a confidence and security that when we pass from this worldly existence, we will live again with Him. Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, we can be cleansed of sin and stand as partakers of the gift of our

Almighty Father. Then we will know the glory that God “hath prepared for them that love him.”<sup>24</sup>

This is the transforming power of charity.

When Jesus gave His disciples a new commandment to “love one another; as I have loved you,”<sup>25</sup> He gave to them the grand key to happiness in this life and glory in the next.

Love is the greatest of all the commandments—all others hang upon it. It is our focus as followers of the living Christ. It is the one trait that, if developed, will most improve our lives.

I bear testimony that God lives. His love is infinite and eternal. It extends to all of His children. Because He loves us, He has provided prophets and apostles to guide us in our time. He has given us the Holy Ghost, who teaches, comforts, and inspires.

He has given us His scriptures. And I am grateful beyond description that He has given to each of us a heart capable of experiencing the pure love of Christ.

I pray that our hearts may be filled with that love and that we may reach out to our Heavenly Father and to others with new vision and new faith. I testify that as we do so, we will discover a greater richness in life. In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. 1 Corinthians 12:31.
2. 1 Corinthians 13:1.
3. See 1 Corinthians 13:1–2.
4. Moroni 7:47.
5. Matthew 22:36.
6. See Frederic W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), 528–29.
7. Matthew 22:37–40.
8. 1 Corinthians 8:3.
9. *History of the Church*, 4:227.
10. Galatians 5:14.
11. See Galatians 6:2.
12. *History of the Church*, 5:498.
13. Mark L. McConkie, *Remembering Joseph: Personal Recollections of Those Who Knew the Prophet Joseph Smith* (2003), 57.
14. “Selflessness,” Sept. 23, 2007, broadcast of *Music and the Spoken Word*; available at [www.musicandthespokenword.com/messages](http://www.musicandthespokenword.com/messages).
15. *Oedipus at Colonus*, in *The Oedipus Cycle*, trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1949), 161–62.
16. 1 John 5:3.
17. Mosiah 5:2.
18. See John 13:35.
19. See Matthew 25:31–40.
20. See Matthew 25:40.
21. John 3:16.
22. D&C 19:18.
23. See John 15:13.
24. 1 Corinthians 2:9; see also Isaiah 64:4.
25. John 13:34.