Foundational Talks

The Great Commandment
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The following is a portion of the original General Conference address by Elder Wirthlin. The full text of this talk is available at www.byui.edu/studentliving.

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.”

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.”

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.

“Charity is the pure love of Christ.” 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?”

The Pharisees had debated this question extensively and had identified more than 600 commandments. 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.”

Since that day, this inspired pronouncement has
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.”12

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.”15

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.”16 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.”17

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,
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.”

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.”

Because the Savior laid down His life for us, 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.”

This is the transforming power of charity.

When Jesus gave His disciples a new commandment to “love one another; as I have loved you,” He gave 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.
4. Moroni 7:47.
8. 1 Corinthians 8:3.

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