

"THE PURE LOVE OF CHRIST":
THE DIVINE PRECEPT OF
CHARITY IN MORONI 7

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While conversing with members of the Quorum of the Twelve at Brigham Young's home, the Prophet Joseph Smith stated that "a man would get nearer to God by abiding by [the Book of Mormon's] precepts, than by any other book."¹ The Book of Mormon provides several important insights more clearly than any other record.²

Consider, for example, the precept, or doctrine, of charity.³ The most developed scriptural writings of charity are found in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon. The Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians is similar in many ways to the contents of Mormon's sermon on charity.⁴ Because of the similarities, one may wonder how the precepts of charity contained in the Book of Mormon could bring us nearer to God than even Paul's writings on the same subject. A closer inspection of Mormon's sermon reveals an understanding and foundation that will, if abided by, actually get a person nearer to God than by abiding by more superficial forms of charity.

Rather than being satisfied with describing what charity is *like*,

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Mormon provides a straightforward definition of what charity actually *is*. With simple and absolute clarity, Mormon defines charity as “the pure love of Christ” (Moroni 7:47). Like all definitions of charity, Mormon’s interpretation places divine love at the very core. Thus, some may feel that the Book of Mormon precept of charity really doesn’t differ all that much from the other scriptural or traditional definitions. “It’s still all about love,” they may point out, “and everything else is only decoration.” But Mormon’s definition is much more than decoration. It is explicit rather than implicit, particularly in the way he connects charity inseparably to Christ.

Some may ask, Can you really go wrong with love—in any form? But Mormon taught that “if ye have not charity, ye are nothing” (Moroni 7:46) and that “whoso is found possessed of it [charity] at the last day, it shall be well with him” (Moroni 7:47). Obviously, saying that charity is important is an understatement. But what if people *understate* charity and are left with a form that isn’t even the same charity Mormon spoke of? What if the present understanding of charity has already shifted from the divine precept taught in the Book of Mormon?

CONTEMPORARY CHARITY

As malicious acts of terror become more common and as indiscriminate violence spreads, government leaders have called for a renewed sense of charity, or love, toward humanity as a whole. David Cameron, Britain’s Conservative Party leader, for example, felt that showing “a lot more love” would be the best long-term solution to crime and antisocial behavior.⁵ Most people like Cameron’s approach and believe that love does have its far-reaching benefits. Society’s confidence in love should not be surprising, for our culture has practically adopted the song “All You Need Is Love” as a prescription for most of its problems. And certainly the Apostle Paul taught that charity was the greatest of all virtues (see 1 Corinthians 13:13).

In Paul’s letter to Timothy, he wrote of the conditions of our day: “This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come,” and he described a world filled with people who are proud, disobedient, unholy, traitors, liars, and immoral (see 2 Timothy 3:1–7). Included in Paul’s list of perils is “having a form of godliness, but denying the power

thereof,” and Paul concludes, “from such turn away” (v. 5). Some may question how perilous “having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof” could really be. To understand the possible peril of this particular circumstance, we could ask, in what ways do we embrace “forms of godliness” but deny its source of power?

Consider how easily society embraces forms of godliness while, at the same time, vehemently opposes any type of connection with God. Typically society readily accepts the acts of Jesus Christ—kindness, compassion, promotion of peace, understanding, and love—but will not acknowledge any serious connection these acts have with Christ and His doctrines or precepts. “For many,” wrote Robert L. Millet, professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, “the doctrine of Christ has been replaced by the ethics of Jesus.”⁶ Thus, some enjoy the “ethical” aspects of the ministry of Jesus but cannot tolerate the doctrinal teachings of the divine Christ. In short, they love the *form* of godliness but despise the power thereof, namely, God. It is in this sense that charity is really little more than a “form of godliness” and is disconnected from its power—the divine.

This disconnect can also be seen in the etymology of *charity*. Technically, the English word *charity* is derived from adaptations from the Old French *charité*, based on the Latin *cartatem*. Scripturally, the Vulgate New Testament derived *charity* from the Latin *caritas*, while Greek versions are based on *agape*. All these terms are roughly translated as *love*. It is true that many other words describing aspects of love have also been used to define *charity*. Words like *benevolence*, *affection*, *kindness*, or *esteem* all come to mind. Even though every word either originated from some form of the term *love* or was associated with it, it should be pointed out that in earlier times, these definitions of charity were framed under the rubric of divine love. In short, the early word sources for *charity* were connected, in some way, with the divine Christ.⁷

Unfortunately, the meaning of charity has transformed over the years. By A.D. 1225, charity continued to include terms like *love*, *kindness*, *affection*, *generosity*, and *goodness* but had lost some of its obvious religious connection.⁸ Sadly, the gap between charity’s affiliation with the divine was widened by the 1300s, when charity became the term of choice for the act of giving alms, service, or compassion to the needy. By the late

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1600s, the definition of charity morphed into an institutional context describing organizations that rendered such services as “charitable institutions.”⁹

Please understand that this is not an attempt to minimize or vilify love, kindness, compassion, generosity, or ethics in any way. In truth, these are admirable traits and necessary for a healthy society. Surely some could care less whether charity was connected to the divine as long as it provided practical, beneficial service to mankind. On the other hand, some feel that because these acts are good then a person exhibiting these behaviors will still come closer to God whether they intended to or not. But while these practical and even biblical ideas of charity have favorable results, even the slightest disconnect with the divine stalls our progression.

While Mormon did teach that all things which are good come from God (see Moroni 7:12), he was more specific as his speech continued: “Every thing which inviteth to do good, and *to persuade to believe in Christ*, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God” (Moroni 7:16; emphasis added). We must remember that charity has a designed purpose: to persuade people to believe in Christ. This recalls President Gordon B. Hinckley’s advice: “It is not enough just to be good. You must be good for something.”¹⁰ It also underscores Elder Bruce C. Hafen’s teaching that “service to others will surely bring us closer to God, especially when motivated by an unselfish sense of personal compassion. But even such desirable service will not of itself complete our relationship with God, because it will not by itself result in the bestowal of the complete attributes of godliness.”¹¹

Thus, even with good intentions, forms of godliness without its true source of power may provide some measure of reward; they are ultimately ineffective in helping us become as Christ truly is. Perhaps this is what C. S. Lewis meant when describing affection, friendship, intimate love, and charity as good but, when disconnected from the divine, being “unworthy to take the place of God by the fact that they cannot even remain themselves and do what they promise to do without God’s help.”¹² Without God’s help, charity will, at best, bring us closer to our fellowmen. While this is good and worthy, it does not necessarily help

us come nearer to God, and we forfeit divine possibilities. Paul warned of such “forms of godliness” and cautioned us to turn away or flee because these subtle misconceptions are the sort that creep in and lead the silly away. Sadly, such are “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7).

Clearly, the precept of charity taught in the Book of Mormon is not really the same charity so often discussed today. It is only what Elder Neal A. Maxwell called a “particularized charity,” or “the pure love of Christ,” that will serve us well in the last days.¹³ The precept of charity as contained in the Book of Mormon is particular in that it is divinely connected and can never be reduced to mere ethical behavior—as good as ethics may seem. Because it is divinely connected, charity must be understood from a godly perspective that, in turn, has divine expectations and outcomes making possible divine empowerment to change.

THE LOVE OF CHRIST

Because the Book of Mormon’s precept of charity is a “particularized” type of love, it is vital to understand exactly what the phrase “love of Christ” means. A narrow interpretation of this phrase yields only two meanings: (1) the “love of Christ,” meaning Christ’s love, or the love that comes *from* Christ, and (2) the “love of Christ,” meaning the love *we have for* Christ.

Love from Christ

In considering the first interpretation, we are to understand that those who have charity have actually received pure love *from* Christ. Naturally, Christ loves all mankind and those who have the love *from* Christ feel of His abiding comfort and know of His deep affection for each of us. But there is a deeper, more direct, and necessary way we partake of the love *from* Christ. John taught that God’s love for the world is embodied in Jesus Christ. “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.” He continues, “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:9–10).

It appears that we receive God’s love by receiving the Savior and

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His Atonement. Christ taught, "He that receiveth me receiveth my Father" (D&C 84:37). Likewise, Christ's love for us directly parallels God's love for us. Moroni, as he spoke to the Savior, said, "I remember that thou hast said that thou hast loved the world, even unto the laying down of thy life for the world, that thou mightest take it again to prepare a place for the children of men" (Ether 12:33). Moroni then said, "I know that this love which thou hast had for the children of men is charity" (Ether 12:34). Charity, in this context, is the love *from* Christ and is embodied in Christ's teachings and Atonement. "It is through the love and mercy of the Son of God for humanity," President Joseph Fielding Smith testified, "that this redemption comes."¹⁴

King Benjamin taught that salvation was possible "only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent" (Mosiah 3:17). Both King Benjamin and Mormon taught, those who receive the love *from* Christ receive the Redemption of Christ and become His children (see Mosiah 5:7; Moroni 7:48; D&C 34:3). Thus, it is only as we accept the love *from* Christ as manifest in the Atonement that we become His children—His sons and daughters—and it is clear that becoming His children requires entering into sacred covenants (see Mosiah 5:5–7). Mormon, in his sermon dealing with charity, also emphasized Christ's teachings to "repent . . . and come unto me, and be baptized in my name, and have faith in me, that ye may be saved" (Moroni 7:34). Because the love *from* Christ is manifest in the Atonement and because it is only through the Atonement and covenant ordinances that we can become the children of Christ and be saved, it makes perfect sense that Mormon taught that "whoso is found possessed of it [charity, or the pure love of Christ] at the last day, it shall be well with him" (Moroni 7:47).

Love for Christ

When we possess the love *from* Christ, we discover "a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2). In this change, we obtain "a new heart filled with charity" that comes only "through the Atonement."¹⁵ A heart filled with the love *from* Christ greatly changes our disposition and our love *for* Christ. "We love him," John wrote, "because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). As we receive the Atonement, we begin to feel

a pure love *for* Christ. Obviously, this is more than just affection, appreciation, or admiration. The pure love *for* Christ envelopes us. It requires all our might, mind, and strength (see Moroni 10:32).

In Mormon's sermon, he urged us to pray to be "filled with this love [charity, or the pure love of Christ]" (Moroni 7:48). If we are really *filled* with a pure love *for* Christ, we are required to give all our heart, and it doesn't take long to find that we have very little room for anything else but Christ. It is ironic that when the Savior was born into mortality, the inns were filled, leaving no room for Him. While today there is still little room for the Savior in the world, there is ample room for Him in the hearts of those who possess a pure love *for* Him. Those with charity have room in their hearts for the Savior, but they have very little room for anything else. In this complete condition, they possess "an eye single to the glory of God" (D&C 4:5), or, in other words, Christ fills them and there is no room for pride, self-aggrandizement, or avarice.

"LOVE ONE ANOTHER"

Some may ask, "What about loving others? Isn't that part of the love of Christ?" After all, those who love Christ have been commanded to keep His commandments (John 14:13), and Jesus taught that the first great commandment is to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." He then added, "And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:37–39). According to this, those who keep the first great commandment and possess a love *for* Christ must love others *as* Christ loves them (see John 13:34). In truth, however, this is not accomplished by obedience and obligation alone.

As we receive the pure love of Christ—meaning the love *from* Christ (the Atonement), which in turn generates our love *for* Christ—our disposition is changed. Our love for others results more from this change than from dutifully keeping His commandments alone.

Consider, for example, Lehi's experience when partaking of the fruit of the tree of life, which represented the "love of God." As Lehi received Christ's love *for him* (meaning partaking of the fruits of Christ), his own love *for Christ* increased. "As I partook of the fruit thereof," Lehi said of this experience, "it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy"

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(1 Nephi 8:12). The product of Lehi's experience was a manifestation of love for others. "Wherefore," Lehi explained, "I began to be desirous that my family should partake of it also" (1 Nephi 8:12).

Another example of this process was when Enos, the son of Jacob, was hunting in the woods. After Enos received the love *from* Christ and was forgiven, he stated, "I began to feel a desire for the welfare of my brethren, the Nephites; wherefore, I did pour out my whole soul unto God for them" (Enos 1:9). This charity continued to swell, and his love for the Lamanites increased.

Finally, consider that same pattern when the sons of Mosiah repented and felt the love *from* Christ. Following this experience, "they were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish. . . . And thus did the Spirit of the Lord work upon them" (Mosiah 28:3-4).

Note that in all three examples, those possessing the pure love of Christ through the Atonement didn't feel compelled or pressured to "love one another," as Christ commanded (John 13:34). They were changed creatures, and their love for others was directly connected to receiving the pure love *from* Christ. "The Atonement in some way, apparently through the Holy Ghost," Elder Hafen wrote, "makes possible the infusion of spiritual endowments that actually change and purify our nature, moving us toward that state of holiness or completeness we call eternal life or Godlike life." He then insightfully concludes, "At that ultimate stage we will exhibit divine characteristics not just because we think we should but because that is the way we are."¹⁶

"PURE LOVE OF CHRIST"

Mormon did not define charity simply as the "love of Christ" but as the "*pure* love of Christ." Consider two lessons taught by this specific wording. First, love and Christ are inseparable. In other words, charity is the *pure* "love of Christ," the genuine form of His love. It is the real thing, not counterfeit or even diluted.

Pure Love and Christ

In some ways, this has already been addressed, at least in regards to how the etymology of charity and love has progressively diluted any

affiliation with the divine. But to truly understand the *pure* love of Christ, we must consider Mormon's precept of charity again—at least, from a different vantage point. Mormon's sermon on charity was delivered to those “of the church” who were “peaceable followers of Christ” (Moroni 7:3) rather than those who did not believe in Jesus or might naturally mistake acts of ethical behavior as acts of charity. As such, this sermon places heavy responsibility on the followers of Christ to take care to understand and exercise charity in its purest form. Thus, followers of Christ must never juxtapose love (in whatever form) with the love of Christ. I recall, for example, a member bearing testimony of the power of love. The testimony was sincere and heartfelt. Yet other than closing in the name of Christ, there was no mention of Jesus Christ or the gospel. In short, this was a fine testimonial of the power of love, but it was not a testimony of the power of the love *of Christ*. In no way am I implying that this member did not bear pure testimony; the member did not, however, bear testimony of the pure love of Christ. Please know it is not my intent to be critical or even judge the acceptability or value of any member's testimony. It is, however, my intent to provide a practical illustration of how easy it is for the *pure* love of Christ to be diluted by members and thus forfeit its promised power.

Consider another subtle dilution to understand the pure love of Christ. It is not uncommon for members to define charity as “Christlike” love. While this descriptor may be mostly correct, charity is not *like* Christ's love, it *is* Christ's love. This reminds me of counterfeit watches sold on big-city street corners at a fraction of the cost of the genuine product. These watches bear the name, logo, color, and styling of their genuine counterparts. Some fakes are better than others and include real gold, diamonds, and leather. They are sure to impress those that cannot discriminate between the genuine brand name and its counterfeit. Some feel that the fakes keep time just as well as the real thing, and so a multimillion-dollar racket continues to thrive. But though these watches may look *like* the real thing and even keep time *like* the real thing, in the end, the value of the counterfeit watch will *never* be the same *as* the real thing. In this way, the term *Christlike love* may approximate *the love of Christ*, but it does not possess the same value or power as *the pure love of Christ*. The Book of Mormon precept of charity is

pure and not counterfeit, and charity is not something that looks *like*, sounds *like*, acts *like*, or even feels *like* Christ's love—it *is* Christ's love.

In truth, it is impossible for us to even love *like* Christ on our own. Charity is not attainable by our own power, dedication, or personal development. Mormon taught that charity is *bestowed* by God upon those who “pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart” to “be filled with this love [pure love of Christ]” and “are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ” and “become the sons of God” (Moroni 7:48). As such, it is impossible to even practice *Christlike* love without some connection with Christ.

Pure Love and Behavior

The second lesson gleaned when considering the *pure* love of Christ is that our behaviors must also be pure. According to Mormon, the peaceable followers of Christ would be known by their works. In fact, their works reveal their truest character. “For I remember the word of God which saith by their works ye shall know them,” Mormon taught. He continued, “If their works be good, then they are good also” (Moroni 7:5). Mormon also taught that if we “offereth a gift, or prayeth unto God, except he shall do it with real intent it profiteth him nothing” (Moroni 7:6). When it comes to charity, at least in its purest form, our behavior is more than just “talking the talk.”

Incongruent behavior dilutes charity to the point that it is no longer charity—at least charity in its most pure form as defined in Mormon's sermon. “Some people wear masks of decency and outward righteousness,” President James E. Faust warned, “but live lives of deception, believing that, like Dr. Jekyll, they can live a double life and never be found out.”¹⁷ The inner conflict President Faust refers to is, of course, from Robert Louis Stevenson's 1888 best-selling novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Stevenson's work describing the struggle between the good and evil within the same man was so moving that the characters of his novel actually became a mainstream phrase (“Jekyll and Hyde”) for describing incongruent behavior.

It is hypocritical to profess charity but act in ways contrary to those professed principles. It is also deeply disturbing that virtue could ever be the front for vice, but unfortunately it isn't very surprising when such

activities actually take place. Consider the Houston-based energy company Enron. By the end of its sixth consecutive year of having been named “America’s Most Innovative Company” by *Forbes* magazine, Enron plunged into bankruptcy due to legal entanglements involving unprecedented fraud and corruption. In Jekyll-and-Hyde fashion, Enron executives and employees read a sixty-four-page “Code of Ethics” manual and penned their signatures certifying personal agreement and compliance long before they were found guilty of spurious behavior.¹⁸

When people have pure charity, it is unlikely that their behavior is determined by a situation or current temptation. Rather than being a code of conduct or a skill set of learned ethics, pure charity is literally a manifestation of our character—who we are rather than just what we do. Elder C. Max Caldwell said that charity “is an internal condition that must be developed and experienced in order to be understood. We are possessors of charity when it is a part of our nature.”¹⁹

CONCLUSION

When we receive the pure, undiluted love *from* Christ (which comes only through the Atonement of Christ and by entering into sacred ordinances) and the pure, undiluted love *for* Christ (which empowers our ability to keep His commandments and love others just as Christ loves us), we experience a mighty change and we *become* as Christ is. “When he [Christ] shall appear,” Mormon concluded in his profound sermon, “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure” (Moroni 7:48).

Because the ultimate purpose of charity is to cause us to become as Christ is, we must never mistake charity for its counterfeits—regardless of how good and important they may seem. Only when charity is inseparably connected with Jesus Christ can the real outcome be realized—to be as He is. In this light, when Mormon preached that a man “must needs have charity; for if he have not charity he is nothing” (Moroni 7:44), one can see that a man without charity really is *nothing* like Jesus Christ.

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 4:461.
2. It should be remembered that the ancient texts are not necessarily represented in their original or even intended forms. Joseph Smith taught, "I believe the Bible as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers. Ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976], 327). Nephi reminded us that "plain and precious things were taken away" from scriptural texts (see 1 Nephi 13:25–29).
3. Precepts, by definition are more than ideas or concepts. Precepts are official or authorized instructions, directions, rules, or mandates. In other words, a precept is typically seen as something official or authorized. In this way, some may liken a precept with a doctrine.
4. See Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 122.
5. "UK Youth Need More Love, Says Conservative Leader," *Taipei Times*, July 12, 2006.
6. Robert L. Millet, "A Divine Deterrent to Creeping Relativism," in *LDS Marriage and Family Relations* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1998), 26.
7. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), s.v. "charity."
8. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, see s.v. "charity," 2.a.
9. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, see s.v. "charity," 4b, 5, 6.
10. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Stand Up for Truth," in *Speeches* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1997), 22.
11. Bruce C. Hafen, *The Broken Heart: Applying the Atonement to Life's Experiences* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 197.
12. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1960), 166.
13. Neal A. Maxwell, *Notwithstanding My Weakness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 47.
14. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963), 4:58.
15. Henry B. Eyring, *To Draw Closer to God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 71.
16. Bruce C. Hafen, *The Broken Heart: Applying the Atonement to Life's Experiences* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 18.
17. James E. Faust, "The Enemy Within," *Ensign*, November 2000, 46.
18. Brian Cruver, *Anatomy of Greed* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2002), 329–31, 333, 346.
19. C. Max Caldwell, "Love of Christ," *Ensign*, November 1992, 30.