



Elder Dallin H. Oaks

“As He Thinketh in His Heart”

ELDER DALLIN H. OAKS

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My dear fellow servants, my interest in the teaching of our youth is long-standing. In 1967—before many of you were born—our oldest daughter began attending early-morning seminary in Chicago. During most of over forty-five years since that time, I have had children, grandchildren, and now a great-granddaughter attending seminary, institute, or a university in the Church Educational System. As teachers, as staff and administrators, as CES missionaries, and as the companions of these servants of the Lord, your responsibilities are vital to preparing the rising generation for their responsibilities in the Church and kingdom of God.

I.

Our young people are amazing in their faith and their devotion to what is good and right. Measured by any righteous criteria, they are superior. For

example, a recent study showed that the percent of young Mormons who stay true to their faith and regularly attend Church services is the highest of any faith group in America.¹ I believe our youth and young adults are better than any earlier generation. Yet they still need our help to reinforce them against the diversions and evils that surround them, which are intense and persuasive. In an address to this same CES audience nearly a decade ago, President Boyd K. Packer observed that “the world is spiraling downward at an ever-quickenning pace.”² And in rededicating the Boise Idaho Temple in November 2012, President Thomas S. Monson declared that our young members “walk in a world saturated with the sophistries of Satan.”³

The difficulties faced by gospel teachers—parents or those called or employed—are magnified by the modern technology to which their young students have instant access. As Sister Julie B. Beck, former Relief Society general president, described a few years ago, “There are media messages everywhere that are anti-family, and our young people are very connected with media. . . . Increasingly, our youth are seeing no reason to form a family or get married in spite of all the teaching you give them. They are being desensitized about the need to form eternal families.”⁴

I will speak about some of these anti-family messages and suggest some things we can teach to counteract them. In the context of your sequential scripture teaching, you are responsible to teach the basic doctrine of marriage and the family. My message is intended to help you in that effort. I seek to add to the remarkable, heaven-inspired recent outpouring of helps to strengthen our young members’ role in hastening the work of the Lord in these last days.⁵

II.

Sometimes the most important things we can teach—the things most needed by our students—are things we teachers tend to take for granted. We can neglect to teach simple, basic truths because we assume they are understood by all. For example, consider the fundamental importance of this basic Bible truth taught by the prophet Isaiah: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8–9).

Second Nephi chapter 9 has a similar teaching about the foolishness of learned men who set aside the counsel of God (see 2 Nephi 9:28). And in the book of Luke we read Jesus’s response to the Pharisees who “derided” Him

for His teachings: “Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God” (Luke 16:14–15).

From these scriptures, I conclude that followers of Christ think differently than others. I was introduced to that idea as a young man studying law at the University of Chicago. Raised in Mormon country with little contact with persons of other beliefs, I was intrigued when I learned that a part-time worker in our law library was studying for the ministry, pursuing the degree Doctor of Divinity. Imagine my surprise when I learned in our conversations that while he believed that Jesus Christ was “a great teacher,” he did not believe that He was the divine Son of God.

“What church do you belong to?” I naively asked him.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” he replied. “I’ll take any position that offers me a good situation—teaching, preaching, or counseling.”

This man desired to do what he saw as good, but he lacked the fundamental, underlying belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost that I assumed was believed by all Christians. When it came to the purpose and practice of religion, he obviously thought differently than I.

That is my subject. I will describe the reality and significance of the fact that on many important subjects involving religion, Latter-day Saints think differently than many others.

III.

When I say that Latter-day Saints “think differently,” I do not suggest that we have a different way of reasoning in the sense of how we think. I am referring to the fact that on many important subjects, our assumptions—our starting points or major premises—are different from many of our friends and associates. They are also different from many assumptions currently used in the media and in other common discourse. For example, because Latter-day Saints know our Heavenly Father’s plan for His children, we know that this mortal life is not a one-act play sandwiched between an unknowable past and an uncertain future. This life is like the second act in a three-act play. Its purpose is defined by what is revealed about our spiritual existence in act 1 and our eternal destiny in act 3. Because of our knowledge of this plan and other truths that God has revealed, we start with different assumptions than those who do not share our knowledge. As a result, we reach different conclusions

on many important subjects that others judge only in terms of their opinions about mortal life.

In some ways our experience is the same as the Apostle Peter's recorded in the sixteenth chapter of Matthew. Jesus taught His Apostles that He would soon go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and finally be killed.

"Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee. But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men" (Matthew 16:22–23).

Peter did not savor "the things that be of God, but those that be of men" when he argued that Jesus would not be killed in Jerusalem. By reasoning from the wisdom of men, he reached the wrong conclusion. If, on that occasion, Peter had reasoned from "the things that be of God"—from the plan that required the Savior to die—he would not have been chastened. Then he would have had what the scriptures describe as the "mind of the Lord" or the "mind of Christ" (Romans 11:34; 1 Corinthians 2:16; D&C 102:23; see also 2 Nephi 9:39), which includes the ability to understand and think clearly about the application of eternal gospel truths and teachings to the various circumstances we face in mortality.

We live in a world where many advocate and practice things that are contrary to "the things that be of God"—His plan of salvation. This produces much of the misunderstanding and opposition our young people face from friends and associates. For example, we are surrounded by associates and a culture that maintain that it is not wrong to have sexual relations without being married. A recent survey reports that 53 percent of the American public believes this.⁶ Similarly, in my conference talk in October 2012, I cited the fact that in a recent period, 41 percent of all births in the United States were to women who were not married.⁷ Most of these births were to couples that were cohabiting—living together outside of marriage. Couples giving birth to children and raising them without being married is common and accepted by many.

How should our youth respond when their associates and even their classroom teachers conclude that marriage is not important anymore and that children suffer no disadvantage if their parents are not married? Similarly, how should they respond to familiar proposals to redefine the family?

I suggest that it may be preferable for our young people to refrain from arguing with their associates about such assertions or proposals. They will often be better off to respond by identifying the worldly premises or assumptions in the assertions they face and then by identifying the different assumptions or premises that guide the thinking of Latter-day Saints. This won't elicit agreement from persons who don't share our faith, but it can move the discussion away from arguing over conclusions to identifying the real source of disagreement.

Here is another illustration: A powerful and influential modern school of thought is “moral relativism,” the idea that there is no absolute right or wrong. Behind that idea is the assumption that there is no God or, if there is a God, that He has given no commandments that apply to us today. That idea puts its adherents in the same position as the unfortunate people the prophet Mormon described as “without Christ and God in the world; . . . driven about as chaff before the wind” (Mormon 5:16).

Latter-day Saints obviously begin with a different premise: there is a God who is the source of eternal law, and He has given commandments that establish a right and a wrong for many choices. Also, in the third act of His eternal plan, we will be held accountable for the extent to which our mortal deeds and desires have been in harmony with those commandments. We oppose moral relativism, and we must help our youth avoid being deceived and persuaded by reasoning and conclusions based on its false premises.

IV.

Where do we look for the premises with which we begin our reasoning on the truth or acceptability of various proposals? We anchor ourselves to the word of God, contained in the scriptures and in the teachings of modern prophets. Unless we are anchored to these truths as our major premises and assumptions, we cannot be sure that our conclusions are true. Being anchored to eternal truth will not protect us from the tribulation and persecution Jesus predicted (see Matthew 13:21), but it will give us the peace that comes from faith in Jesus Christ and the knowledge that we are on the pathway to eternal life. Remind your students of the following teachings, which are the starting points for our thinking about many modern trends and advocacies.

We think differently about family issues than many people in the world because of what we know about the eternal purpose and nature of our family relationships. Our family proclamation states that “marriage between a

man and a woman is ordained of God” and that “the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children.”⁸ Knowing that marriage between a man and a woman is essential to God’s eternal plan, Latter-day Saints persist in the time-honored religious principle that marriage is foremost an institution for the procreation and raising of children. We also adhere to the proven experience that marriage is the best institution for the economic, political, and moral well-being of the human family. As President Spencer W. Kimball said many years ago, “We know that when things go wrong in the family, things go wrong in every other institution in society.”⁹

We reject the modern idea that marriage is a relationship that exists primarily for the fulfillment of the individuals who enter into it, with either one of them being able to terminate it at will. We focus on the well-being of children, not just ourselves.

Our Church handbook explains, “By divine design, both a man and a woman are essential for bringing children into mortality and providing the best setting for the rearing and nurturing of children.”¹⁰

Our family proclamation declares, “Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity.”¹¹

Our belief that we are commanded to “honor marital vows with complete fidelity” introduces the next fundamental premise stated in the family proclamation: “God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.”¹²

This declaration is not politically correct, but it is true, and we are responsible to teach and practice its truth. That obviously sets us against many assumptions and practices in today’s world—the birth of millions of innocent children to unwed mothers being only one illustration.

The next basic truth I quote from the family proclamation is a principle whose implications go far beyond what many of our youth realize. It requires careful attention and inspired teaching: “Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.”¹³

The eternal characteristic of gender has many consequences. One is explained in this statement from *Handbook 2*: “The nature of male and female spirits is such that they complete each other. Men and women are intended to progress together toward exaltation.”¹⁴

Men and women spirits “complete each other” because they are different, and they “progress together toward exaltation” by, among other things, honoring those eternal, created differences. Thus, the family proclamation states, “By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners.”¹⁵

We rejoice in the distinctive and mutually supportive roles of men and women in God’s plan. Men and women are to be different, yet they are inseparably bound together in a mutually supportive relationship to accomplish God’s plan. Sister Elaine S. Dalton, Young Women general president, gave this important counsel to our BYU students:

Young women, you will be the ones who will provide the example of virtuous womanhood and motherhood. . . . You will also be the ones who will provide the example of family life in a time when families are under attack, being redefined, and disintegrating. You will understand your roles and your responsibilities. . . .

Young men, you will be the ones who will know that priesthood power—the power to act for God on the earth—is to be accessed only through purity. And you will use that priesthood power to bless generations.

For each of you, the very purity and virtue of your lives will attract the gaze of all the world in these latter days.¹⁶

All of us—men and women alike—find true and lasting happiness when we understand and rejoice in our unique roles in God’s great plan of salvation.

Of course we see the need to correct some long-standing deficiencies in legal protections and opportunities for women. But in our private behavior, as President Gordon B. Hinckley taught many years ago about the public sector, we believe that any effort “to create neuter gender of that which God created male and female will bring more problems than benefits.”¹⁷

The family proclamation concludes with a plea “to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society,” and urges “responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed” to do so.¹⁸

When we begin by measuring modern practices and proposals against what we know of God’s plan and the premises given in the word of God and the teachings of His living prophets, we must anticipate that our conclusions will differ from persons who do not think in that way. But we are firm in this because we know that this puts us on safe ground eternally. Many others will

not agree, but our explanation of why we think in this way will give others a better understanding of our positions.

V.

In a general conference talk in October 2009, I gave additional examples of ways some others think differently than faithful Latter-day Saints.¹⁹ These examples, which concerned possible confusion between the competing demands of love and law, are important enough to revisit here because they occur within loving relationships, even within Latter-day Saint families.

In the first example, a young adult in a cohabiting relationship tells grieving parents, “If you really love me, you would accept me and my partner just like you accept your married children.” This young person asserts that parental love should override God’s commandments. Parents who understand the purpose and effect of God’s commandments and their own responsibilities obviously think differently. While not condoning conduct that violates God’s commandments, they do not exclude a son or daughter from their love or their family circle.

Two other examples concern the effect of God’s love. In one, a person rejects the doctrine that a couple must be married for eternity to enjoy eternal family relationships in the next life. He or she declares, “If God really loved us, I can’t believe He would treat husbands and wives in this way.” In the other example a person says his or her faith has been destroyed by the human suffering God allows to be inflicted on a person or a race, concluding, “If there were a God who loved us, He wouldn’t let this happen.”

Persons who think in this way mistakenly believe that God’s love is so great and so unconditional that it will mercifully excuse them from obeying His laws or the conditions of His plan. They reason backward from their desired conclusion and assume that the fundamentals of God’s eternal law must adhere to their concepts. But this thinking is confused. The love of God does not supersede His commandments or His plan.

Those who understand the relationship between God’s love and His law know that “there is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:20–21).

Mercy cannot rob justice (see Alma 42:25). Those who obtain the mercy available because of God’s great love for His children are “they who have kept the covenant and observed the commandment” (D&C 54:6).

This fundamental principle helps us understand the why of many things, like justice and mercy balanced by the Atonement. It also explains why God will not forestall the exercise of agency by His children. Agency—our power to choose—is fundamental to the plan that brings us to earth. Typically, God does not intervene to forestall the consequences of some persons’ choices in order to protect the well-being of other persons—even when they kill, injure, or oppress one another—for this would destroy His plan for our eternal progress (see Alma 42:8). While God will not prevent those choices (see Mosiah 24:14–15), He will bless us to endure the consequences of others’ choices. And those whose mortal opportunities are cut short or reduced by the choices of others eventually have every blessing and opportunity offered through the mercy and Atonement of Jesus Christ.

The eternal consequences and fairness of God’s honoring His children’s choices—their agency—culminates in what we have called act 3, our eternal destination in our Heavenly Father’s plan. The Final Judgment that occurs there explains many things about the purpose and effect of our difficult mortal journey. We read in modern revelation, “All kingdoms have a law given” (D&C 88:36). For example: “He who is not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory. And he who cannot abide the law of a terrestrial kingdom cannot abide a terrestrial glory. And he who cannot abide the law of a telestial kingdom cannot abide a telestial glory” (D&C 88:22–24).

In other words, the kingdom of glory to which we are assigned in the Final Judgment is not determined by love but by the law that God has given us—because of His love—to qualify us for eternal life, “the greatest of all the gifts of God” (D&C 14:7). Those who know that truth will surely think differently about many things than those who do not.

VI.

The world in which we live is like the field described by the Savior in the Gospel of Matthew. Until the time of harvest, the wholesome and desirable wheat is growing side by side with the tares sown by the enemy, who is the devil (see Matthew 13:24–30, 39). In the parable of the sower, Jesus described the result: When the sower’s word falls on stony places, where a

hearer has “not root in himself,” he will be offended when “tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word” (see Matthew 13:20–21). Other seeds fall “among thorns” and, as Mark describes, “the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful” (Mark 4:18–19). This parable describes the reaction of any of us who are offended when we suffer tribulation or persecution or otherwise become unfruitful because of “the cares of this world” or our “lusts of other things.”

We should apply the caution Jesus gave to His disciples to “beware of the . . . doctrine of the Pharisees” (Matthew 16:12). We cannot escape the conclusions, teachings, and advocacy of modern Pharisees. We must live in the world. But the teaching that we not be “of the world” (John 15:19; 17:14, 16) requires us to identify error and exclude it from our thinking, our desires, and our actions. In this way, through faith and trust in Jesus Christ and our knowledge of our Heavenly Father’s plan, we can press forward with confidence in these troubled times.

We must help our young people think clearly about gospel truths and how to apply them to the challenges they face. Those who do this will be founded upon “the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God,” and will qualify for the prophetic promise that the mighty opposition of the devil will have no power to drag them into the gulf of misery because they are built upon that “sure foundation” and “cannot fall” (Helaman 5:12).

I testify of the truth of that secure foundation. I testify of Jesus Christ, who is the Author and Finisher of our faith. And I testify that we will be blessed when we anchor ourselves to the word of the Lord and the teachings of His prophets. And I testify of this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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Notes

1. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 138.
2. Boyd K. Packer, “The One Pure Defense,” address to CES religious educators, February 6, 2004, 4; see si.lds.org.
3. “Boise Idaho Temple: ‘Again Hallowed,’” *Church News*, November 25, 2012, 5.
4. Julie B. Beck, “Teaching the Doctrine of the Family,” Seminars and Institutes of Religion satellite broadcast, August 4, 2009, 4.
5. See Sarah Jane Weaver, “Roundtable: ‘Hastening the Work,’” *Church News*, December 30, 2012, 4–5.

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6. See Tom W. Smith and others, *General Social Surveys, 1972–2010: Cumulative Codebook* (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 2011), 410.
 7. See Joyce A. Martin and others, “Births: Final Data for 2010,” *National Vital Statistics Reports* 61, no. 1 (August 28, 2012), 8–9.
 8. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.
 9. Spencer W. Kimball, “Families Can Be Eternal,” *Ensign*, November 1980, 4.
 10. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), 4.
 11. “The Family,” 129.
 12. “The Family,” 129.
 13. “The Family,” 129.
 14. *Handbook* 2, 3.
 15. “The Family,” 129.
 16. Elaine S. Dalton, “Prophetic Priorities and Dedicated Disciples,” BYU devotional address, January 15, 2013, 7; see speeches.byu.edu.
 17. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Live Up to Your Inheritance,” *Ensign*, November 1983, 84.
 18. “The Family,” 129.
 19. See Dallin H. Oaks, “Love and Law,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 26–29.