

# ***THE LORD'S LAW OF PARENTHOOD***

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*This address was given at the BYU Family  
Expo Conference, April 4–5, 2005.*

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The Lord's law of parenthood is spread throughout the gospel teachings found in the standard works of the Church, reflecting the eternal significance of the parent-child relationship. These teachings provide clear directions for assisting parents and children in achieving an eternal family. As you consider the Lord's law of parenthood, you will be treading on holy ground and be dealing with matters of eternal significance. You are encouraged to look beyond the words to the thoughts behind these words as they are impressed upon your minds by the Holy Spirit.

## **The Sealing Ordinance**

The doctrines found in the Lord's law of parenthood are considered by many to be the crown jewels of eternity, since they embrace the family and family relationships, particularly children. The cornerstone of the Lord's law of parenthood is the sealing ordinance, the most sacred and the highest saving ordinance revealed by God to man. The ordinance was first introduced by the Prophet Joseph Smith to nine of the leaders of the Church on May 4, 1842, where, according to the words of the Prophet: "I spent the day in the upper part of the store, that is in my private office . . . instructing them in the principles and order of the Priesthood, attending to washings, anointings, endowments and communication of keys pertaining to the Aaronic Priesthood, and so on to the highest

order of the Melchizedek Priesthood. . . . In this council was instituted the ancient order of things for the first time in these last days” (D.H.C. 5:1–2). This singular experience was followed about one year later on May 28, 1843, by the uniting of Joseph and Emma in the sacred sealing ordinance. That ordinance—the grandeur, breadth, and depth of which is often not appreciated—provides the doctrinal cradle for the relationship of parents to children and children to parents. In this ordinance a man and a woman are united to form a new family unit under the patriarchal order of the priesthood. That unit is endowed with blessings from heaven not available in any other way.

President Joseph Fielding Smith, while speaking of the eternal blessings contained in the sealing ordinance, explained that: “Those born under the covenant . . . have claims upon the blessings of the gospel beyond what those not so born are entitled to receive. They may receive a greater guidance, a greater protection, a greater inspiration from the Spirit of the Lord” (Doctrines of Salvation 2:90). Of course, like all blessings, the blessings of the sealing ordinance are conditioned upon obedience to the covenants made in the ordinance, which includes full and unconditional obedience to all the laws of God. Besides the promises to the husband and wife, the ordinance bestows upon children born or adopted into the covenant blessings of a staggering nature. They are promised the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant, which includes the opportunity to receive the holy Melchizedek Priesthood and all that implies. Further, the promise is given that no child brought under the umbrella of this mighty ordinance will be lost—not one chair will be empty in the eternities. This promise, which is the fountainhead of hope for many parents struggling with errant and disobedient children, is well described in these words from President Lorenzo Snow:

Yes, in the next life we will have . . . our sons and daughters. If we do not get them all at once, we will have them some time. . . . You that are mourning about your children straying away will have your sons and your daughters. If you succeed in passing through these trials and afflictions and receive a resurrection, you will, by the power of the Priesthood, work and labor, as the Son of God has, until you get all your sons and daughters in the path of exaltation and glory. This is just as sure as that the sun rose this morning over yonder mountains. Therefore, mourn not because all your sons and daughters do not follow in the path that you have marked out to them, or give heed to your counsels. Inasmuch as we succeed in securing eternal glory, and stand as

saviors, and as kings and priests to our God, we will save our posterity (In *Millennial Star*, 22 Jan 1894, 51–52, quoted in the *Ensign*, October 2003:63).

The simple fact is that in this world of rampant disobedience to God’s law, and with the power of Lucifer unleashed in its full fury upon mankind, the sacred nature of the husband-wife and parent-child relationship created by the sealing ordinance simply provides an unequaled spiritual boost for potentially celestial families to achieve that humbling goal.

### **Obedience**

Time and space preclude a discussion of all commandments contained in the Lord’s law of parenthood, but we will consider some of the more important laws which augment the cornerstone provided by the sealing ordinance. The first of these is the doctrine of obedience—obedience to God’s commandments—all of them. As President Joseph F. Smith once said, “Obedience is the first law of heaven” (*Journal of Discourses* 16:247–248), and Paul, in his epistle to the Colossians, in a succinct and unequivocal manner, set forth the need for obedience to be taught to the children when he said, “Children, obey *your* parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord” (Colossians 3:20).

It is compelling that when the Lord revealed the Ten Commandments to Moses, among them was the sage injunction to “honor thy father and thy mother.” It is interesting that the Lord felt the commandment to be of such significance that it was mentioned ahead of the terrible sins of murder, adultery, stealing, and bearing false witness. The synoptic gospels make frequent reference to this same commandment as evidenced by this parallel injunction found in the book of Matthew, “For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and thy mother” (Matthew 15:4). “Honoring,” as used here, means, in addition to other things, that children will be obedient to the righteous direction of their parents. While the commandment itself is reason enough to insist upon obedience, the simple fact is that children’s obedience to their parents serves

as a fruitful training ground for obedience to God. How can a child who is disobedient to his parents be expected to be obedient to his God?

The problem is that in today's society, all too few parents live the law of obedience to God's commandments. The obvious question then becomes, if the parents are not obedient to God's laws, how can they ever hope to teach their children the necessity of obedience? The adage by Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Who you are speaks so loudly I can't hear what you're saying," certainly applies to parents who preach obedience to children and fail to live it themselves. Without wishing to make anyone uncomfortable, just do a short and simple self-inventory:

1. When was the last time you had a deep spiritual experience?
2. Are you studying your scriptures daily?
3. Have you truly learned how to pray?
4. When did you last have a prayer answered?
5. How regular and sacred are your family home evenings?

My guess is that many of you would not want to have to answer these questions in a company of people if you knew that angels were there to correct any slight misstatements which you might inadvertently make. To expect obedience from a child, without giving obedience as a parent, creates an irreconcilable conflict in the child's mind and almost guarantees a warped sense of right and wrong.

Even for those parents who think they are being obedient to God's laws, the challenge of teaching obedience to their children is sometimes a difficult task. The process can be an exhausting one, particularly since the accountability and consequence phase very frequently comes at the end of a long day when fathers would much rather relax and mothers still face the challenge of finishing the day's work. (While this division of labor may not be desirable, it is a fact in all too many homes.) However, no matter how difficult, inopportune, or time-consuming the process may be, if you want a child to ultimately learn to obey the rules of the land and the rules of God, you must first teach him to obey the rules of the home. There is no way for a home in which parents do not expect obedience to their directives, or in which accountability and consequences do not exist, to produce children who will grow up to love and obey God. Please understand

that this does not mean that some of those children do not ultimately become obedient to God's commandments; but normally, when that happens, it is not a result of what transpired in the home. It comes about because someone or something else did the parents' job for them.

### **Self-Worth**

Another important commandment in God's law of parenthood deals with the parents' responsibility to help each child gain a sense of identity and self-respect. President Harold B. Lee, in discussing this issue during a session of general conference, said:

A lovely mother in a nearby community wrote this to me, "I love America, I love my husband, I love my children, I love my God, and why is this possible? Because I truly love myself."

Such are the fruits of self-respect. Conversely, when one does not have that love for himself of which this sister speaks, other consequences can be expected to follow. He ceases to love life. Or if he marries, he has lost his love for his wife and children—no love of home or respect for the country in which he lives, and eventually he has lost his love of God. Rebellion in the land, disorder and lack of love in the family, children disobedient to parents, loss of contact with God, all because that person has lost all respect for himself (*Ensign*, January 1974:2).

The tragedy of teenage misbehavior can very frequently be traced to a child in a young adult body who has yet to acquire self-respect. Sometimes, this quality of self-respect is referred to as lack of self-esteem, feelings of inferiority, or feeling worthless. No matter how expressed, they all go back to someone who does not have feelings of love for himself. The importance of this character quality is amply demonstrated by the scripture, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22:39). Inherent in that magnificent commandment is the fact that without love of self there is neither a standard by which to love others nor the capacity to properly and appropriately do so. The child without a proper sense of identity and a proper degree of self-respect is never able to function in harmony with God's laws.

It is interesting that one of the underlying doctrines which produces self-respect and identity is one infrequently considered in that light. Consider the often quoted passage found in the book of Malachi: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Malachi 4:5–6). This passage is almost universally understood to refer to work for the dead and binding the hearts of living children to deceased fathers. While that is certainly of great importance, you will want to consider an equally important aspect of the promise which is that it also applies to turning the hearts of living children to their living fathers (parents) and living fathers to their living children. This aspect of this law of God was clearly understood by President Harold B. Lee when he wrote the following:

When the full measure of Elijah’s mission is understood . . . it applies just as much on this side of the veil as it does to the other side of the veil. If we neglect our families here in having family home night and we fail in our responsibility here, how would heaven look if we lost some of those [we love] through our own neglect? . . . So, the hearts of you fathers and mothers must be turned to your children right now, if you have the true spirit of Elijah, and not think that it applies merely to those who are beyond the veil. Let your hearts be turned to your children, and teach your children; but you must do it when they are young enough to be schooled. And if you are neglecting your family home evening, you are neglecting the beginning of the mission of Elijah just as certainly as if you were neglecting your research work of genealogy (Harold B. Lee, banquet speech delivered at the Eighth Annual Priesthood Genealogical Seminar, 3 August 1973; printed in *Syllabus for the Ninth Annual Priesthood Genealogy Seminar*, pp. 529–30. Quoted in *Thy People Shall Be My People and Thy God My God: The 22d Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* 1994:70).

It is hoped that you can see the glorious truth which is unfolding before you, for here, buried in what is most often thought of as work for the dead, is a very powerful doctrine dealing with work for the living.

For those of you not yet clear on what is being taught, contemplate the following: If you wish to assist your children in obtaining a sense of self-identity, self-respect, and

feelings of self-worth, introduce them to the principles inherent in the promise of Malachi. Introduce them to their ancestors. Introduce them to family members. Wherever possible, provide ways for them to get to know their grandparents, great-grandparents, and other older members of the extended family. The long-established practice of weekend visits to these ancestors is a great way to bring this blessing into your children's lives. Teach them about the bonds of family. Teach them about family history and about family history work. Learning about grandparents and others of that age who are members of the extended family, whether those grandparents and others are on this side of the veil or the other side of the veil, produces in the child a connection with something of great importance to him or her. And, in that process their self-identity is enhanced, their self-respect improved, and their ability to love others strengthened. The simple and practical manner in which this great truth can work in your child's life is illustrated by a beautiful story contained in an article written by Elder Bruce C. Hafen. Elder Hafen commented that he wanted to share a story about his oldest son who was born shortly after his father's death. He went on to say:

We gave this older son his grandfather's name as a middle name. He felt awkward about that old-fashioned name in his early years and didn't use it. But when he took up debate in high school and learned that his grandfather had been a champion debater for BYU in the 1920s, he began feeling a tie to his namesake. My father had kept a personal journal during much of his adult life, and one day I showed my boy an entry describing his grandfather's big debate for BYU against Princeton. I left that journal volume with him, hoping he would want to read it.

He was a good boy, but he wasn't easy to raise. We prayed for patience. We prayed that the seeds of faith would take root in his heart, but knew we couldn't force that process. (I thought during those days about my own older brother, who had died from an accident during his turbulent adolescence. How my parents had prayed and grieved for him!) Then one night my son left me a simple note: "I never want to do anything that would hurt you and mom the way your brother's problems hurt your parents." I wondered how he could have known of something so personal from a generation ago. Then I remembered the journal, but I chose not to ask him any more.

A few weeks later, our son worked his way through a particularly trying experience and came to us late at night to tell us what had happened. "Dad, I never knew Grandpa

Hafen, but I felt he was there, helping me.” I held him close that night, and I told him more about his grandfather.

Not long afterward, he was deciding how he should respond to a mission call. We were in southern Utah for a family reunion. On Sunday afternoon, with no explanation, he drove alone to the isolated little canyon where his grandfather had loved to ride his horse—the place, in fact, where he had passed away. Our son had read of this canyon in the journal and had seen it from a distance, but had never been in it. In a secluded spot there, he knelt and asked the Lord’s help to sort through his questions about his faith, his mission, and his life. At his missionary farewell, he alluded to the sacredness of that day and described the deep assurance and sense of direction he had carried from his grandfather’s canyon. Now, some years later, with children of his own, he reflects in his life that same assurance and direction, and I know the satisfaction my father must feel (*Ensign*, June 1994:46).

Knowing from where we came allows us to understand who we are and gives us direction for where we want to go. It provides us with an anchor for our lives and provides motivation to honor those with whom we belong. In that process we tend to avoid the mistakes so common to growing up. It is said that some organizations who work with troubled youth have found that introducing those youth to their own family history in such a way as to make their ancestors, both living and dead, come alive in their lives is of great help in working out the problems which these youth face. My belief is that in addition to helping those who are troubled work out of their problems, it keeps those who are not troubled from ever getting into problems.

### **Reverence**

When the Lord told Moses to “put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5), he was providing the groundwork for yet another part of the Lord’s law of parenthood. Treat sacred things with reverence. Just as the irreverent treatment of sacred things brings heartache, proper reverence for those things will bring a heart full of gladness. Section 68 of the Doctrine and Covenants beginning at verse 25 contains some of the most concentrated instruction concerning the Lord’s law of parenthood in all of the scriptures. Here the Lord, among other things,

gives a directive to parents when He says: “And again, inasmuch as parents have children in Zion, or in any of her stakes which are organized, that teach them not to understand the doctrine of repentance, faith in Christ the Son of the living God, and of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of the hands, when eight years old, the sin be upon the heads of the parents.”

Baptism is a sacred ordinance, and a child eight years of age is fully capable of understanding the breadth and depth of the sacredness of that ordinance. All too often, parents excuse irreverence for this ordinance by saying, “But they are only eight.” The answer to that attitude is very simple: Yes, they are eight; and the Lord has announced from His throne in yonder heavens that eight years of age is adequate, when properly trained, to understand sufficiently to partake of this sacred experience. The challenge lies neither in the eight years of age requirement nor in the depth of the ordinance, but rather, in the failure of parents to properly prepare their children to honor the sacredness of that which occurs.

As if to further emphasize the need for reverence in sacred things, the Lord goes on to say in the 28 verse, “And they shall also teach their children to pray.” Most parents seek to discharge that injunction by kneeling regularly with their children in prayer in the hope that the child absorbs, through the power of example alone, all that is needed to understand prayer. That learning to reverence prayer requires more than simply hearing someone else pray is illustrated by this most interesting passage from the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter, first verse of the book of Luke, “And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray.” If the disciples of Jesus, upon hearing the Master offer prayer, needed to add the simple request, “teach us to pray,” how much more is the demand that parents teach their children to pray.

Teaching someone to pray involves the process of teaching the doctrines of prayer. Among other things, in order to pray to a loving Heavenly Father it is necessary to understand the characteristics of that loving Heavenly Father. It is axiomatic that if we are to have faith in God and pray in faith to God, we must first know who God is. What are His characteristics? What is our relationship to Him? What are the rules governing prayers to Him? Parenthood requires not only an understanding of each of these, and many more, but also taking the time to pass this understanding on to our children.

The Lord continues in His instruction to parents that we should “observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy” (Doctrine and Covenants 68:29). As you know, keeping the Sabbath holy is more than attending church. Reverencing the Sabbath involves understanding the doctrines of the Sabbath, the blessings which come from the Sabbath, the sacred nature of the Sabbath, and why the Lord instituted it. All of these are part of the responsibility of parenthood. They are equally the responsibility of childhood.

One final word on reverencing sacred things: How many of us really consider family home evening as sacred? You see, sacredness is not alone reserved for chapels, altars, and ordinances. Sacredness is not borne only from the physical nature of the sacred thing, but also from its Author. Some things are sacred just because God has made them so. These things may be in one of the rooms of the family home, they may be interrupted by babies crying, and they may lack the formality of a sacrament meeting; but they are sacred, nevertheless. The parent’s duty to teach the child and the child’s duty to learn about the sacredness of sacred things obviously must start with understanding enough to know what is sacred and then how to appropriately reverence it. This, too, is part of the law of parenthood.

### **Selflessness**

The greatest life ever lived serves to illustrate the last part of the Lord’s law of parenthood to be considered now. It is the quality of selflessness. Perhaps the most profound statement in all of holy writ is that found in John 17:3 where the Lord pronounces, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” The prophets through the ages have clearly taught that this simple statement of qualification for eternal life contains something far deeper than many understand. It is not asking that we know about Christ nor even that we are able to recount His teachings. It is requiring that we become like Christ. If we want our children to inherit eternal life, they, like us, must become like the Master.

While there are many qualities possessed by Him, one with which many are greatly impressed is His selflessness. Selflessness is the act of putting other people ahead of

yourself, the act of thinking of others first. Christ is the epitome of doing just that. It probably started in the premortal existence when He answered the call of the Father to serve in the very important assignment of working out the atoning sacrifice. Certainly, it was evident in His life while upon the earth. He did not enter the Garden of Gethsemane and plead for the cup to pass that fateful night for selfish reasons. He entered and underwent an ordeal that caused Him to bleed at every pore for the benefit of others. It was an act of consummate selflessness.

What many parents do not realize is that this character trait is something that can be taught and it can be learned. For a moment, consider your own children. You will be an unusual family, indeed, if there is not at least one who continually inquires about the well-being and desires of his brothers and sisters, and at least one other who seems to always begin his or her sentences with “I.” The fact that children may come with a propensity toward selfishness does not mean that they cannot be taught to change. As with almost everything else which children learn, particularly in their young, formative years, the source of learning is seated in the parents. As a parent, consider your own ways:

- Is your conduct selfless?
- Do you consider others before yourself?
- Are you teaching selflessness to your children?

While everyone realizes there are some circumstances where mothers must work outside the home, it is equally obvious to most that some mothers are working outside of the home to fulfill their or their husband’s selfish desires. The same can be said of fathers who put their desires to advance in their professions or occupations ahead of their desires to be a good father or husband. The list of possibilities for parents to demonstrate selfishness rather than selflessness is almost never ending. A parent who plays golf or engages in other personal indulgences, while neglecting children at home, is teaching a lesson in selfishness much more powerfully than any family home evening lesson will ever be able to unteach.

The trouble with selfishness in most of our lives is that it is easily camouflaged and can be made to look like something honorable. Too many husbands protest that the

reason they are not available to participate in family activities and to be involved fathers to their children is that they are trying to be successful in their occupations. In all too many cases, the father's real motivation starts with one or more forms of selfishness: He does not want someone else to get the promotion. He wants the prestige which comes with the corner office, or he wants the neighbors to know he is successful. In short, the real motivation is based in pride, one of the most deadly forms of selfishness. Imagine what he is teaching his children about selflessness.

Mothers do much the same thing when they feel they need to work outside the home in order to be fulfilled. I am talking about those mothers who have bought into the current trend that satisfaction can only come from achievements outside the home. The one thing that is critical to the growth of children, and particularly to the development of their character, is a mother. That means a mother who is more than biologically a mother, but a mother who is emotionally their mother. It is generally true that being a mother is the hardest job in the entire world; and that to be a good mother requires great desire to do so, as well as a great willingness to honor the role of motherhood, at the center of which is selflessness.

The point, then, is simply this: If you want selfless children, be a selfless parent. An interesting story is told about a family and the decisions they are making that illustrate the point. This is a young family with five children, all of them under eight years of age. The father, after seven years of college, holds the highest degree his discipline awards. Being bright and capable, he quickly rose to great heights in his chosen profession. He was a principal in one of the premier companies in his city. Then, one day, he realized that he wanted to be able to spend more time on a consistent basis with his wife and family. He also realized that the career path he was on would not allow that to become a reality. After serious soul searching he established his list of priorities. At the head of the list were service to the Lord, his wife, and his family. He then went through an interesting process in which he asked and answered questions in the following order:

1. How much time do I want to be the kind of husband and father I would like to be and to properly serve my Heavenly Father?
2. With the time that is left, how much money can I reasonably expect to make?
3. What kind of a lifestyle will that much money provide?

#### 4. Are the benefits worth the cost?

After agreement with his wife and family reached in a family council, he resigned his position and obtained new employment consistent with his time parameters. Today, he lives in an adequate but smaller home, drives an adequate but less expensive car, and is the kind of father about which the scriptures speak.

The foregoing describes an exercise in selflessness. The simple fact is this young couple is wisely following the counsel of the prophets. It is a statement of fact that parents who live a selfless life will have very little difficulty in teaching their children to be selfless. Considering others first should become a way of life for your children. That happens by engaging in repeated acts of selflessness which then makes it possible for a person to grow into someone who puts God ahead of himself.

If about now you are tempted to ask, “Has it always been this hard?” it is well to suggest that before you form a judgment, you wait until you have had an opportunity to talk with Adam and Eve, Father Lehi, or any of the host of others who shouldered this great responsibility and opportunity before you were ever born. The truth is that you are dealing with the very heartbeat of eternity when you deal with the family and with children. The structure of celestial eternity is based upon the eternal family. All that our loving Heavenly Father and our Savior Jesus Christ have done since before the beginning of this world has been for the exaltation of the family, and each of us is charged with the sacred duty of insuring that our family qualifies to receive the promised blessings of eternal life.