

Strengthening Marriage Relationships

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"Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:11).

A marriage relationship needs constant nurturing.

Introduction

We believe that marriage is sacred. It is the creation of a divine union ordained by God and bound by covenants (see D&C 49:15). Because the marriage relationship is so important, it must be protected and nurtured. It is worth the effort to strengthen and improve it.

People grow strong within a good marriage. "In marriage all of the worthy yearnings of the human soul, *all that is physical and emotional and spiritual*, can be fulfilled" (Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, Apr. 1981, p. 16; or *Ensign*, May 1981, p. 15; italics added).

The Gospel Gives Guidelines for Strengthening Marriages

One man was having a great deal of trouble in his marriage and family life, almost to the point of having the marriage end. He came eventually to see that his problems were "*spiritual and of his own making*. He also saw that *he* was in the best position to do something about them." He came to understand "what the Lord has said all along through the scriptures and the prophets, but which so many of us fail to understand: *The keys to peace and harmonious relationships are to be found within our personal application of the basic principles of the gospel*. In other words, in order to have peace and harmony in our relationships, we must first have peace and harmony within ourselves. Such peace comes when we are doing what we know to be right by following the still small voice of the Spirit" (C. Richard Chidester, "A Change of Heart," *Ensign*, Feb. 1984, pp. 6–8).

We need to invite the Spirit of the Lord into our marriages. To do this, couples should pray together, fast together, and study the scriptures together. Doing these things often requires extra effort because our lives become very busy with work, home, and Church responsibilities.

The Lord has given us gospel principles that apply to every aspect of the marriage relationship. Consider what sacrifice, obedience, and consecration would do to strengthen us and our marriages. Think what the basic principles of compassion and service can do. We often think of how other people need to learn these principles, but they are most meaningful when we practice them with those who are closest to us.

Two other very important gospel principles that apply to marriage are repentance and forgiveness. Elder Hugh W. Pinnock stated: "So often when we make mistakes, even innocent mistakes, damage has been done and an apology is in order. Along with learning to say, 'I'm sorry,' husbands and wives must learn to say, 'I forgive.' Jesus taught that to be forgiven by our Heavenly Father depends, in part, on our ability to forgive those who trespass against us. Some of the strongest marriages of which I am aware have been between partners who could say, 'I am sorry,' and who forgive each other" ("Making a Marriage Work," *Ensign*, Sept. 1981, p. 36).

It is so easy to continue to hold grudges and cling to memories of past offenses. But the Lord, who forgives us when we forsake our sins and remembers them no more, sets a pattern for all to do the same (see D&C 58:42–43).

READ: Colossians 3:12–13. What does it mean to forbear one another? How can we apply this scripture to marriage?

Marriage Often Requires a Change of Heart and Behavior

In marriage and other relationships, we often wish that the other person would change something we do not like. Sometimes it takes years and much heartache to finally learn that we cannot change anyone else. We can look to ourselves and change what needs to be changed in our own attitudes and behavior. We can be examples and influences for good, and we can pray for inspiration and help. But the other person still needs to seek the Lord and change himself or herself.

Elder Robert E. Wells counseled that we must seek the Lord's help in changing our own behavior and our own hearts. "As we invite the Lord to soften our hearts toward one another and as we sincerely repent of our weaknesses, he will change our hearts. He will turn us from our selfish, petty, worldly attitudes and fill us with pure, Christlike love" ("Overcoming Those Differences of Opinion," *Ensign*, Jan. 1987, p. 62).

READ: Alma 5:14, 26–37. What did Alma teach about the need for a change of heart? What attitudes or actions did he identify that hurt relationships? What did he plead for the people to do?

Physical Relationships Can Strengthen Emotional and Spiritual Relationships

Latter-day prophets have frequently taught that selfishness is a cause of much conflict in marriages. Spouses must constantly work to be unselfish in their relationships. One area in which they must be unselfish is in their physical intimacy.

Once a couple is married, sexual expression is ordained of God. It is a strong force in strengthening love, unity, and companionship. But couples must use this force in unselfish, righteous ways. A Latter-day Saint marriage counselor explained: "It is of interest to note that the words *sex* or *sexuality* do not appear in the scriptures. Rather, it is described in holy writ with the words *know* or *knew*. This idea of 'knowing' or 'becoming acquainted with' connotes a deeply satisfying aspect of married love. . . .

"In my work as a marriage counselor, I have found that there are some couples who feel that sexuality should be restricted to one dimension—reproduction. Yet President Kimball has said: 'We know of no directive from the Lord that proper sexual experiences between husbands and wives need be limited totally to the procreation of children.' (*Ensign*, Oct. 1975, p. 4.) While creating children is an integral and beautiful aspect of marital intimacy, to use it only for that purpose is to deny its great potential as an expression of love, commitment, and unity.

"On the other hand, there are couples who seem to feel that the only reason for sexuality is physical gratification. These people become so obsessed with the achievement of sensation that the emotion of love is all but forgotten. Still others use sexuality as a weapon or a bargaining tool. This is not only a misuse of a God-given privilege, it shows great selfishness on the part of one or both partners and makes sexuality a destructive rather than a unifying element in marriage" (Brent A. Barlow, "They Twain Shall Be One," *Ensign*, Sept. 1986, pp. 50–51).

Indeed, there are times when the emotional and physical needs of one spouse make it desirable for the other to be especially affectionate.

Pornography and sexual perversion are not a part of God-ordained relationships. In sexual matters, as in all other aspects of marriage, there are virtues to be observed: "There are some people who have said that behind the bedroom doors anything goes. That is not true and the Lord would not condone it" (Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982], p. 312).

Unselfishness Is a Key to a Happy Marriage

"Marriage is . . . a relationship of responsibility and opportunity. In marriage, both partners have the opportunity to give. I believe few wives realize the power they have to help keep their husbands near them *physically, emotionally, and even spiritually*. On the other hand, I also believe few wives sense the degree of frustration and alienation husbands feel when a wife ignores his needs and interests. I believe a wise and loving Heavenly Father has given a wife the ability to achieve oneness with her husband. The key is unselfishness" (Brent A. Barlow, "They Twain Shall Be One," p. 53; italics added).

A husband must also be unselfish. "A husband needs to spend time with his wife. The two need to have time together to share ideas, to grow and learn together, and to experience joy together. A wife is not going to be too excited about a husband who spends all his time at work, at church meetings, in hobbies that exclude her, or in front of the television or newspaper. A husband who always spends time in ways that exclude his wife communicates to her that she is not very important. Yet his wife should be the most important person in his life" (Brent A. Barlow, "They Twain Shall Be One," p. 52).

As married couples learn to be unselfish, they will find great joy and personal development. "We would do well to ever remind ourselves of our first mortal parents. Instructing them, Heavenly Father commanded them to give attention to the whole range of their powers and passions. They were to subdue the earth, create and nurture posterity, become one flesh physically, cleave unto each other socially and emotionally, and learn to serve the purposes of God. They, as we, were endowed with bodies, parts, and passions after the image of the Creator. This implies that as we, the children of God, develop virtuously within marriage we will discover ever more profound enjoyments of all his creations including our own *emotions, bodies, and spiritual capacities*" (*A Parent's Guide*, p. 49; italics added).

Elder Boyd K. Packer declared: "Marriage is not without trials of many kinds. These tests forge virtue and strength. The tempering that comes in marriage and family life produces men and women who will someday be exalted" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1981, p. 16; or *Ensign*, May 1981, p. 15).

President Ezra Taft Benson has said: "Spiritual growth comes by solving problems together—not by running from them. Today's inordinate emphasis on individualism brings egotism and separation. Two individuals becoming 'one flesh' is still the Lord's standard. (See Genesis 2:24.)

"The secret of a happy marriage is to serve God and each other. The goal of marriage is unity and oneness, as well as self-development. Paradoxically, the more we serve one another, the greater is our spiritual and emotional growth" (in Conference Report, Oct. 1982, p. 86; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1982, p. 60).

Additional Resources for Personal and Family Use

Francine Christensen, "Blending Family Styles: Making a Second Marriage Work," *Ensign*, June 1981, pp. 28–31.

James E. Faust, "The Highest Place of Honor," in Conference Report, Apr. 1988, pp. 42–46; or *Ensign*, May 1988, pp. 36–38.

"The Greatest Test a Marriage Can Have," *Ensign*, Aug. 1988, pp. 22–24.

Renon Klossner Hulet, "Partners in Everything but the Church," *Ensign*, July 1988, pp. 48–50.

Yoshihiko Kikuchi, "Daughter of God," in Conference Report, Apr. 1988, pp. 88–90; or *Ensign*, May 1988, pp. 76–77.

Dennis L. Lythgoe, "I Have a Question," *Ensign*, Apr. 1988, pp. 51–53.

Carol M. Sieverts, "My Husband Always Brings Me Roses," *Ensign*, Apr. 1988, p. 61.

"Time for Each Other," *Ensign*, Dec. 1987, pp. 30–33.

Suggestions for Teachers

Background reading: "Marriage, Marry"; "Marriage, Continuing Courtship in"; "Marriage, Husbands"; "Marriage, Wives" in the Topical Guide of the LDS edition of the King James Bible.

1. Discuss how all of our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs can be fulfilled within marriage. How are these three needs interrelated? How can unmet needs in one area affect the other areas?
2. What specific gospel principles does the lesson identify as necessary for a strong marriage? How do they apply to every aspect of marriage? Ask sisters to share examples of how their own marriages have been blessed because of these or other gospel principles. How do busy Church couples find time for each other? How are repentance and forgiveness the foundation of growth and unity?
3. Why do we sometimes need to change ourselves to change our marriages? In what ways can one spouse help the other to want

to change or improve? How can companion prayer, fasting, and scripture study strengthen a marriage?

4. Discuss how selfishness can destroy a marriage by keeping the partners from growing physically, emotionally, and spiritually. How is marriage a relationship of responsibility and opportunity? In what ways does marriage prepare us for our eternal potential?