

“How Do I Love Thee?”

JEFFREY R. HOLLAND

I am delighted to be with you the day after Valentine’s Day and the day before Sister Holland’s birthday. Guess what is on my mind! Guess what I am going to talk about! Yes, I am going to talk about love, because Shakespeare made me do it. You see, it is the fifteenth of February. If it were the fifteenth of March, it would be the ides of March. And everybody remembers what Brutus did to Julius Caesar on the ides of March—and it befell Mark Antony to get back at Brutus in the great funeral oration, the same Mark Antony who let Cleopatra take him for the proverbial trip up the Nile without a paddle. Never mind that the ides of February were actually the day before yesterday. I am certainly not going to let that stop me from speaking about love and romance and marriage—a topic absolutely foreign to the interests of those on the BYU campus and one scarcely mentioned here this entire month. Indulge me. Pretend you are interested—if only because Sister Holland is my valentine and it is her birthday tomorrow.

You know, winning Sister Holland was not an easy thing to do. I worked at it and worked at it and worked at it until I finally had the courage to ask for her hand. In a romantic setting I said as meekly and humbly as I could, “Pat, will you marry me?”

To which she said, “Oh, dearest darling, dearest loved one, yes. Yes, yes, yes. When shall we set the date? Oh, we have got to reserve the temple. I know exactly what colors I want for the bridesmaids. Should we have the reception indoors or out? And someone must be at the guest book. And I can just see in my mind the cake that we want. . . .”

Then she stopped mid-sentence and said, “Oh, darling. You are so overcome you are speechless. Here I have just gone on and on. Wouldn’t you like to say something on this night of nights?”

To which I replied, “I think I have said too much already.”

She counters that story by reminding me that when I arrived for our first date, her little brother shouted to her, “Hey, dreamboat, your barnacle is here!”

Actually neither of those stories is true, but who knows? Maybe you can use them someday when you have to speak at BYU on love and marriage.

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Do let me now be serious. What I have learned of romantic love and the beauty of marriage I have learned from Sister Holland. I am honored to be her husband and am happy for you that she is on this campus again this morning, if only for an hour or two. As I once said of her, paraphrasing what Mark Twain's Adam said of his Eve, "Wherever she was, there was paradise" (see "Adam's Diary").

I wish to speak to you this morning about Christlike love and what I think it can and should mean in your friendships, in your dating, in serious courtship, and, ultimately, in your marriage.

I approach the subject knowing full well that, as a newly engaged young woman said to me just last month, "There is certainly a lot of advice out there!" I don't want to add needlessly to this rhetoric on romance, but I believe that second only to your membership in the Church, your "membership in a marriage" is the most important association you will have in time and eternity—and to the faithful what doesn't come in time *will* come in eternity. So perhaps all of you will forgive me for offering, yes, more advice. But I wish it to be scriptural advice, gospel advice. Advice, if you will, that is as basic to life as it is to love—counsel that is equally applicable to men and to women. It has nothing to do with trends or tides of the time or tricks of the trade but has everything to do with the truth.

So may I put your friendships and dates and eventually your marriages in a scriptural context this morning and speak to you of what I will try to communicate as *true* love.

After a long wonderful discourse by Mormon on the subject of charity, the seventh chapter of Moroni tells us that this highest of Christian virtues is more accurately labeled "the pure love of Christ."

And it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him [and her].

Wherefore, . . . pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons [and daughters] of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; . . . that we may be purified even as he is pure. [Moroni 7:47–48]

True charity, the absolutely pure, perfect love of Christ, has really been known only once in this world—in the form of Christ Himself, the living Son of the living God. It is Christ's love that Mormon goes to some length to describe for us and that Paul the Apostle did as well some years before, writing to the Corinthians in New Testament times. As in everything, Christ is the only one who got it all right, did it all perfectly, loved the way we are all to try to love. But even though we fall short, that divine standard is there for us. It is a goal toward which we are to keep reaching, keep striving—and, certainly, a goal to keep appreciating.

And as we speak of this, may I remind you, as Mormon explicitly taught, that this love, this ability, capacity, and reciprocation we all so want, is a gift. It is "bestowed"—that is Mormon's word. It doesn't come without effort and it doesn't come without patience, but, like salvation itself, in the end it is a gift, given by God to the "true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ." The solutions to life's problems are always gospel solutions. Not only are *answers* found in Christ, but so is the power, the gift, the bestowal, the miracle of giving and receiving those answers. In this matter of love, no doctrine could be more encouraging to us than that.

I have taken for a title to my remarks Mrs. Browning's wonderful line "How do I love thee?" (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* [1850], no. 43.) I am not going to "count the ways" this morning, but I am impressed with her choice of adverb—not *when* do I love thee nor *where* do I love thee nor *why* do I love thee nor *why* don't you love me,

but, rather, *how*. *How* do I demonstrate it, *how* do I reveal my true love for you? Mrs. Browning was correct. Real love is best shown in the “*how*,” and it is with the *how* that Mormon and Paul help us the most.

The first element of divine love—pure love—taught by these two prophets is its kindness, its selfless quality, its lack of ego and vanity and consuming self-centeredness. “Charity suffereth long, and is kind, [charity] envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own” (Moroni 7:45). I have heard President Hinckley teach publicly and privately what I suppose all leaders have said—that most problems in love and marriage ultimately start with selfishness. In outlining ideal love in which Christ, the most unselfish man who ever lived, is the great example, it is not surprising that this scriptural commentary starts here.

There are many qualities you will want to look for in a friend or a serious date—to say nothing of a spouse and eternal companion—but surely among the very first and most basic of those qualities will be those of care and sensitivity toward others, a minimum of self-centeredness that allows compassion and courtesy to be evident. “That best portion of a good man’s life [is] his . . . kindness,” said Mr. William Wordsworth (*Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* [1798], lines 33–35). There are lots of limitations in all of us that we hope our sweethearts will overlook. I suppose no one is as handsome or as beautiful as he or she wishes, or as brilliant in school or as witty in speech or as wealthy as we would like, but in a world of varied talents and fortunes that we can’t always command, I think that makes even more attractive the qualities we *can* command—such qualities as thoughtfulness, patience, a kind word, and true delight in the accomplishment of another. These cost us *nothing*, and they can mean *everything* to the one who receives them.

I like Mormon and Paul’s language that says one who truly loves is not “puffed up.” Puffed up! Isn’t that a great image? Haven’t

you ever been with someone who was so conceited, so full of themselves that they seemed like the Pillsbury Doughboy? Fred Allen said once that he saw such a fellow walking down Lovers’ Lane holding his own hand. True love blooms when we care more about another person than we care about ourselves. That is Christ’s great atoning example for us, and it ought to be more evident in the kindness we show, the respect we give, and the selflessness and courtesy we employ in our personal relationships.

Love is a fragile thing, and some elements in life can try to break it. Much damage can be done if we are not in tender hands, caring hands. To give ourselves totally to another person, as we do in marriage, is the most trusting step we take in any human relationship. It is a real act of faith—faith all of us must be willing to exercise. If we do it right, we end up sharing everything—all our hopes, all our fears, all our dreams, all our weaknesses, and all our joys—with another person.

No serious courtship or engagement or marriage is worth the name if we do not fully invest *all* that we have in it and in so doing trust ourselves totally to the one we love. You cannot succeed in love if you keep one foot out on the bank for safety’s sake. The very nature of the endeavor requires that you hold on to each other as tightly as you can and jump in the pool together. In that spirit, and in the spirit of Mormon’s plea for pure love, I want to impress upon you the vulnerability and delicacy of your partner’s future as it is placed in your hands for safekeeping—male and female, it works both ways.

Sister Holland and I have been married for nearly 37 years, just a half-dozen or so years short of *twice* as long as we have lived without each other. I may not know everything about her, but I know 37 years’ worth, and she knows that much of me. I know her likes and dislikes, and she knows mine. I know her tastes and interests, hopes and dreams, and she knows

mine. As our love has grown and our relationship has matured, we have been increasingly free with each other about all of that.

The result is that I know much more clearly now how to help her, and, if I let myself, I know exactly what will hurt her. In the honesty of our love—love that can't truly be Christlike without such total devotion—surely God will hold me accountable for any pain I cause her by intentionally exploiting or hurting her when she has been so trusting of me, having long since thrown away any self-protection in order that we could be, as the scripture says, “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). To impair or impede her in *any way* for my gain or vanity or emotional mastery over her should disqualify me on the spot to be her husband. Indeed, it should consign my miserable soul to eternal incarceration in that large and spacious building Lehi says is the prison of those who live by “vain imaginations” and the “pride of the world” (1 Nephi 11:36, 12:18). No wonder that building is at the opposite end of the field from the tree of life representing the love of God! In all that Christ was, He was not *ever* envious or inflated, never consumed with His own needs. He did not once, *not ever*, seek His own advantage at the expense of someone else. He delighted in the happiness of others, the happiness He could bring them. He was forever kind.

In a dating and courtship relationship, I would not have you spend five minutes with someone who belittles you, who is constantly critical of you, who is cruel at your expense and may even call it humor. Life is tough enough without having the person who is supposed to love you leading the assault on your self-esteem, your sense of dignity, your confidence, and your joy. In this person's care you deserve to feel physically safe and emotionally secure.

Members of the First Presidency have taught that “any form of physical or mental abuse to any woman is not worthy of any priesthood holder” and that no “man who holds the priesthood of God [should] abuse his

wife in any way, [or] demean or injure or take undue advantage of [any] woman”—and that includes friends, dates, sweethearts, and fiancées, to say nothing of wives (James E. Faust, “The Highest Place of Honor,” *Ensign*, May 1988, 37, and Gordon B. Hinckley, “Reach Out in Love and Kindness,” *Ensign*, November 1982, 77).

If you are just going for pizza or to play a set of tennis, go with anyone who will provide good, clean fun. But if you are serious, or planning to be serious, please find someone who brings out the best in you and is not envious of your success. Find someone who suffers when you suffer and who finds his or her happiness in your own.

The second segment of this scriptural sermon on love in Moroni 7:45 says that true charity—real love—“is not easily provoked, thinketh not evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity.” Think of how many arguments could be avoided, how many hurt feelings could be spared, how many cold shoulders and silent treatments could be ended, and, in a worst-case scenario, how many breakups and divorces could be avoided if we were not so easily provoked, if we thought no evil of one another, and if we not only did not rejoice in iniquity but didn't rejoice even in little mistakes.

Temper tantrums are not cute even in children; they are despicable in adults, especially adults who are supposed to love each other. We are too easily provoked; we are too inclined to think that our partner meant to hurt us—meant to do us evil, so to speak; and in defensive or jealous response we too often rejoice when we see *them* make a mistake and find *them* in a fault. Let's show some discipline on this one. Act a little more maturely. Bite your tongue if you have to. “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city” (Proverbs 16:32). At least one difference between a tolerable marriage and a great one may be that willingness in the latter to allow some things to pass without comment, without response.

I mentioned Shakespeare earlier. In a talk on love and romance you might well expect a reference to *Romeo and Juliet*. But let me refer to a much less virtuous story. With *Romeo and Juliet* the outcome was a result of innocence gone awry, a kind of sad, heartbreaking mistake between two families that should have known better. But in the tale of *Othello and Desdemona* the sorrow and destruction is calculated—it is maliciously driven from the beginning. Of all the villains in Shakespeare’s writing, and perhaps in all of literature, there is no one I loathe so much as I loathe Iago. Even his name sounds evil to me, or at least it has become so. And what *is* his evil, and *Othello’s* tragic, near-inexcusable susceptibility to it? It is the violation of Moroni 7 and 1 Corinthians 13. Among other things, they sought for evil where none existed, they embraced imaginary iniquity. The villains here rejoiced not “in the truth.” Of the innocent *Desdemona*, Iago said, “I turn her virtue into pitch; / And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all” (William Shakespeare, *Othello*, act 2, scene 3, lines 366–68). Sowing doubt and devilish innuendo, playing on jealousy and deceit and finally murderous rage, Iago provokes *Othello* into taking *Desdemona’s* life—virtue turned into pitch, goodness twisted into a fatal net.

Now, thank heavens, here in Happy Valley this morning we are not talking of infidelity, real or imagined, or of murder; but in the spirit of a university education, let’s learn the lessons being taught. Think the best of each other, especially of those you say you love. Assume the good and doubt the bad. Encourage in yourself what Abraham Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature” (First Inaugural Address, 4 March 1861). *Othello* could have been saved even in the last moment when he kissed *Desdemona* and her purity was so evident. “That [kiss] dost almost persuade / Justice to break her sword!” he said (act 5, scene 2, lines 16–17). Well, he would have been spared her death and then his own suicide if he had broken what he considered justice’s

sword right then and there rather than, figuratively speaking, using it on her. This tragically sad Elizabethan tale could have had a beautiful, happy ending if just one man, who then influenced another, had thought no evil, had rejoiced not in iniquity, but had rejoiced in the truth.

Thirdly and lastly, the prophets tell us that true love “beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7). Once again that is ultimately a description of Christ’s love—He is the great example of one who bore and believed and hoped and endured. We are invited to do the same in our courtship and in our marriage to the best of our ability. Bear up and be strong. Be hopeful and believing. Some things in life we have little or no control over. These have to be endured. Some disappointments have to be lived with in love and in marriage. These are not things anyone wants in life, but sometimes they come. And when they come, we have to bear them; we have to believe; we have to hope for an end to such sorrows and difficulty; we have to endure until things come right in the end.

One of the great purposes of true love is to help each other in these times. No one ought to have to face such trials alone. We can endure almost anything if we have someone at our side who truly loves us, who is easing the burden and lightening the load. In this regard, a friend from our BYU faculty, Professor Brent Barlow, told me some years ago about Plimsoll marks.

As a youth in England, Samuel Plimsoll was fascinated with watching ships load and unload their cargoes. He soon observed that, regardless of the cargo space available, each ship had its maximum capacity. If a ship exceeded its limit, it would likely sink at sea. In 1868 Plimsoll entered Parliament and passed a merchant shipping act that, among other things, called for making calculations of how much a ship could carry. As a result, lines were drawn on the hull of each ship in England. As the cargo was loaded, the freighter would sink lower and lower into the water. When the water

level on the side of the ship reached the Plimsoll mark, the ship was considered loaded to capacity, regardless of how much space remained. As a result, British deaths at sea were greatly reduced.

Like ships, people have differing capacities at different times and even different days in their lives. In our relationships we need to establish our own Plimsoll marks and help identify them in the lives of those we love. Together we need to monitor the load levels and be helpful in shedding or at least readjusting some cargo if we see our sweetheart is sinking. Then, when the ship of love is stabilized, we can evaluate long-term what has to continue, what can be put off until another time, and what can be put off permanently. Friends, sweethearts, and spouses need to be able to monitor each other's stress and recognize the different tides and seasons of life. We owe it to each other to declare some limits and then help jettison some things if emotional health and the strength of loving relationships are at risk. Remember, pure love "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things," and helps loved ones do the same.

Let me close. In Mormon's and Paul's final witnesses, they declare that "charity [pure love] never faileth" (Moroni 7:46, 1 Corinthians 13:8).

It is there through thick and thin. It endures through sunshine and shadow, through darkest sorrow and on into the light. It *never* fails. So Christ loved us, and that is how He hoped we would love each other. In a final injunction to all his disciples for all time, He said, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; *as I have loved you*" (John 13:34; emphasis added). Of course such Christlike staying power in romance and marriage requires more than any of us really have. It requires something more, an endowment from heaven. Remember Mormon's promise: that such love—the love we each yearn for and cling to—is "bestowed" upon "true followers of Christ." You want capability, safety, and security in dating and romance, in married life and eternity? Be a true disciple of Jesus. Be a genuine, committed, word-and-deed Latter-day Saint. Believe that your faith has *everything* to do with your romance, because it does. You separate dating from discipleship at your peril. Or, to phrase that more positively, Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, is the only lamp by which you can successfully see the path of love and happiness for you *and* for your sweetheart. How *should* I love thee? As He does, for that way "never faileth." I so testify and express my love for you and for Him, in the sacred name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight For the ends of Being and ideal Grace. I love thee to the level of every day's Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight. I love thee freely, as men strive for Right; I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise. I love with a passion put to use In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith. I love thee with a love I seemed to lose With my lost saints, -- I love thee with the breath, Smiles, tears, of all my life! -- and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death. I love thee with a love I seemed to lose. Poems to share. How Do I Love Thee? (Sonnet 43). by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Share. How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight For the ends of being and ideal grace. I love thee to the level of every day's Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light. I love thee freely, as men strive for right. I love thee purely, as they turn from praise. I love thee with a love I seemed to lose With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath, Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806 – 1861) was an English poet of the Victorian era. How Do I Love Thee? is sonnet number 43 taken from *The Sonnets From the Portuguese*, a book first published in 1850. Elizabeth Barrett Browning chose this title to give the impression that she had translated the work from the Portuguese and would therefore avoid any controversy. It was dedicated to her husband, poet Robert Browning. But the work did cause a stir. For starters, the inspiration behind the work was Elizabeth's love for the man who had, for all intents and purposes, rescued her from a quietly desperate, reclusive lifestyle she led in London, following the accidental death of her closest brother. Dominated by her possessive father, Elizabeth spent most of her time alone in an upstairs room. I love thee purely, as they turn from praise (simile) Using the word "as" to establish the simile, the speaker compares the pure and humble nature of her love to the humility that decent men exhibit. Just as decent human beings commit good deeds without expecting praise in return, she loves purely without expectation of reward. "By sun and candle-light" (metaphor) The mention of sun and candle-light serves as a metaphor for the passage of time and the course of one's life. The speaker's love fills her days and keeps her going through life. Study Guide for Sonnet 43 (How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.) Sonnet 43 (How do I love thee?