

THE JOY AND BURDEN OF SERVING AS BISHOP: AN OPEN LETTER TO BISHOPS

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Dear Bishop,

The mantle you bear will be a delight. You will observe the healing power of the atonement of Jesus Christ and feel the love our heavenly parents have for their children. You will experience profound joy. The mantle you bear will also be a burden. You will observe the heartache associated with mortality and feel the agony of those who experience unimaginable loss. You will experience profound sorrow.

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf taught that we can “gain precious treasures” as we experience “the intense joys and sorrows of mortality” as we “learn to strive, to seek, and to struggle” in order to “discover truths about God and ourselves.”¹ As we come to know the intense joys and intense sorrows of mortality, we might experience ambivalence. The word “ambivalence” originates from the Latin *ambo* (both) and *valere* (strong) and refers to the tension individuals feel as they simultaneously encounter strong positive and negative experiences.² Ambivalence can create dissonance, anxiety, and frustration but can also energize, motivate, and enlighten, leading to deeper reflection and

1. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Your Great Adventure,” Oct. 2019, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/10/43uchtdorf?lang=eng>.

2. Blake E. Ashforth, Kristie M. Rogers, Michael G. Pratt, and Camille Pradies, “Ambivalence in Organizations: A Multilevel Approach,” *Organization Science* 25, no. 5 (2014): 1453–78.

softer empathy. Ambivalence, although often aversive, can be a powerful driver of increased growth, commitment, and wisdom.³

You might experience ambivalence when you see selfishness, impulsiveness, and harshness, but you will also observe heroic acts of faith, repentance, and forgiveness—often in the same people. Ambivalence might keep you up at night as you wrestle with how to best invite specific individuals to turn back to God. Choose to be as gentle as the Savior would be in guiding them through the miraculous, but difficult, return. Prioritize honoring their agency, loving them, and helping them see that God loves them. Avoid the temptation of trying to shame them into righteous behavior. Shaming is a coercive tool of the adversary; it is a control tactic that undermines the leader and harms the recipient. The tools of the adversary can only lead to regret; they cannot, by their nature, lead to that which is good. Elder Uchtdorf said, “When you fill your hearts with the pure love of Christ, you leave no room for rancor, judgment, and shaming.”⁴

You might experience ambivalence as your responsibilities weigh heavily upon you almost every day of your service. As you honor confidences, you might feel piercing loneliness. As those you love violate commandments, you will plead with God to rescue them from their path of self-destruction. As you see families torn apart, you will pray fervently to know how to comfort them. As you see individuals carry daunting burdens, you will weep with them and seek revelation to know how to help them. You might be given the gift to deeply empathize with those who suffer. This level of empathy will forge deep and lasting connections, but it might also cause you to feel burdens at a depth you have not felt before. Seek to understand, as taught by Brené Brown, that empathy is not “feeling for” other people, it is “feeling with” them in a

3. Naomi B. Rothman, Michael G. Pratt, Laura Rees, and Timothy J. Vogus, “Understanding the Dual Nature of Ambivalence: Why and When Ambivalence Leads to Good and Bad Outcomes,” *Academy of Management Annals* 11, no. 1 (2014): 33–72.

4. Uchtdorf, “Your Great Adventure.”

manner that honors boundaries and does not overwhelm emotional, mental, or spiritual resources. Empathizing—with boundaries—allows you to make generous assumptions about individuals and help them in meaningful ways without taking on their burdens. You will feel their struggles with them and walk by their side, but it is the Lord who has already taken on their burdens; it is the Lord who will heal them. As Elder Dale G. Renlund has taught, the Lord loves mercy and he delights in healing those who need healing.⁵ As you experience the Savior's healing and observe others experience it, your spirit will sing.

You might experience ambivalence as you realize you cannot solve every problem. You will observe that while many will be deeply grateful for your efforts, not everyone will appreciate you all of the time. In fact, some might become frustrated with you because of the counsel you give or a decision you make. Whether individuals express their hurt courageously, impulsively, or passive-aggressively, be gentle in your response. You cannot possibly know the full measure of their burdens or the extent of their suffering. Plead with the Lord to grant you the courage to give the needed counsel and the love to give it in a way that honors their dignity as children of God. Focus on helping them feel known, seen, and understood. Rise to the Lord's call to be a builder, a lifter, and an encourager. Validate generously and praise often without flattery or exaggeration. Actively help others know you believe in them, highlight legitimate examples of their goodness, and help them see themselves as God sees them. This is the essence of your calling: to help all within your stewardship experience the healing power of the atonement of Jesus Christ and feel the love of God.

You might experience ambivalence as you see imperfection in those with whom you serve. Those you love, admire, and respect might disappoint you at times, and you will see your own imperfections with painful clarity. You will wish you could take back something you said

5. Dale G. Renlund, "Do Justly, Love Mercy, and Walk Humbly with God," Oct. 2020, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/10/55renlund?lang=eng>.

or wish you could make a particular decision over again. You will also see moments of excellence and episodes of greatness as those with whom you serve perform remarkable acts of selfless service, overcome nagging weaknesses, and demonstrate advanced levels of resilience. Humanity will both disappoint you and delight you; that is part of our mortal journey together. Embrace this reality and choose to trust those with whom you serve and those who lead you. Be generous in your assumptions about their motives and abilities, be willing to respectfully disagree when necessary, and be as patient with them as you hope they will be with you. Be willing to deal with the messiness of mortality with unflinching hope. As you do, you will see that God can perform great miracles with imperfect people. Elder Quentin L. Cook said, “As leaders, we are not under the illusion that in the past all relationships were perfect, all conduct was Christlike, or all decisions were just.”⁶ In light of this truth, consider this wise counsel from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland: “Be kind regarding human frailty—your own as well as that of those who serve with you in a Church led by volunteer, mortal men and women. Except in the case of His only perfect Begotten Son, imperfect people are all God has ever had to work with. That must be terribly frustrating to Him, but He deals with it. So should we.”⁷

Your heart will break as you see good people fall on hard times. For those who require welfare assistance, provide this aid generously and, above all, in a manner consistent with the character of the Savior. It is your duty to seek out the poor and needy and to help them in a manner that teaches them, builds them up, and enables them to see their divine worth. As you contemplate how to help those in need, consider how you might respond if a grandparent, parent, sibling, or child were to

6. Quentin L. Cook, “Hearts Knit in Righteousness and Unity,” Oct. 2020, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/10/15cook?lang=eng>.

7. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” Apr. 2013, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/04/lord-i-believe?lang=eng>.

need such assistance. Then, help these good brothers and sisters in that same way: generously and compassionately—never in a condescending manner. Elder Holland said, “If we could do more to alleviate poverty, as Jesus repeatedly commands us to do, maybe some of the less fortunate in the world could hum a few notes of ‘There Is Sunshine in My Soul Today.’ . . . I pray we will not let these children of God suffer in silence and that we will be endowed with His capacity to hear the songs they cannot now sing.”⁸ As you prioritize helping others generously, you will feel heaven’s approval. You will see with new eyes and feel the awe-inspiring love the Savior has for those who struggle.

You might experience ambivalence when those you love commit evil acts against others. Your soul will ache for everyone involved. Have the courage and the commitment to our Heavenly Father to do everything you can to protect his vulnerable children from those who have harmed them or who might harm them. Do not falter in this responsibility. Act as a vigilant watchman to protect against abuse. You will always be grateful you provided real protection to those who desperately needed your intervening help.

You will weep for those who experience mental illness. Know that their burdens are real and be generous in helping them get the professional counseling they might need. As Elder Holland has taught, mental illness can become an “affliction so severe that it significantly restricts a person’s ability to function fully, a crater in the mind so deep that no one can responsibly suggest it would surely go away if those victims would just square their shoulders and think more positively.”⁹

Although the unfortunate stigma against seeking professional help to treat mental illness still lingers in our culture, Elder Holland and

8. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Songs Sung and Unsung,” Apr. 2017, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2017/04/songs-sung-and-unsung?lang=eng>.

9. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Like A Broken Vessel,” Oct. 2013, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/10/like-a-broken-vessel?lang=eng>.

others have done much to reduce this stigma by counseling those who are struggling to “seek the advice of reputable people with certified training, professional skills, and good values. . . . If you had appendicitis, God would expect you to seek a priesthood blessing *and* get the best medical care available. So too with emotional disorders. Our Father in Heaven expects us to use *all* of the marvelous gifts He has provided in this glorious dispensation.”¹⁰

You, too, can do much to reduce this stigma and alleviate suffering as you proactively help God’s children get the assistance they might need and minister to them with love and understanding. You will gain a deep appreciation for the words of Elder Renlund: “The Savior loves to restore what you cannot restore; He loves to heal wounds you cannot heal; He loves to fix what has been irreparably broken; He compensates for any unfairness.”¹¹

You might experience ambivalence when the amount of time you have with your family is not what it used to be. Some of the matters brought to your attention will be absolutely essential for you to deal with personally. For those occasions, ask the Lord to lengthen your stride and maximize the quality of your time spent in both roles. You will see that the Lord can do much more with your time than you can do with your time. You will see that he knows how to communicate with you individually and provides tailored guidance in a manner suited to your personality.

The Lord knows exactly how to amplify your capacity. The Lord will sanctify the time you spend with your family, and your family will be ministered to by angels. You will draw strength from spiritual reservoirs you did not know existed, and you will experience tender mercies that help you see that heaven is organized and operates according to families. Your ancestors will become more familiar to you, and your life

10. Holland, “Like A Broken Vessel.”

11. Dale G. Renlund, “Consider the Goodness and Greatness of God,” Apr. 2020, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/26renlund?lang=eng>.

will be richly blessed because of them. They will help you in your most trying times, and you will see that the veil is thin.

Although ambivalence does not always drive positive outcomes—simultaneously experiencing intense joys and intense sorrows may at times become too stressful, painful, or overwhelming—ambivalence is part of mortality and will likely be more pronounced for you in your service as bishop. As you seek to grow spiritually and help others do the same, consider ambivalence as a potential tool to motivate righteous striving.

As our imperfect environments and imperfect selves create a gap between our present circumstances and desired circumstances, we tend to want to fill that gap to try to quiet our ambivalence. As intense joys and intense sorrows create a gap for you, let the love of God fill that gap. The love of God is perfect, infinite, and universal. The love of God is always the answer. Elder Tad R. Callister said, “The Atonement of Jesus Christ is the grandest demonstration of love this world has ever known. The compelling, driving force behind His sacrifice was love, not duty or glory or honor or any other temporal reward. It was love in its purest, deepest, most enduring sense. . . . It was not an abstract love nor was it demonstrated by one dramatic sacrificial act and nothing more. To the contrary, it was a day-by-day, hour-by-hour, even moment-by-moment love!”¹²

Elder Uchtdorf said, “Love is what inspired our Heavenly Father to create our spirits; it is what led our Savior to the Garden of Gethsemane to make Himself a ransom for our sins. Love is the grand motive of the plan of salvation; it is the source of happiness, and the ever-renewing spring of healing.”¹³ If you feel inadequate to love as God loves, it is because we are all inadequate and would remain so without the Savior. President Gordon B. Hinckley said that loving in that manner “is not

12. Tad R. Callister, *The Infinite Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 157–59.

13. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “You Are My Hands,” Apr. 2010, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2010/04/you-are-my-hands?lang=eng>.

easy” and “requires a self-discipline almost greater than we are capable of;” it requires the “mighty power of healing in Christ”¹⁴ and must be “broad enough and strong enough to encompass even the wrongdoer and the critic” as you “stand as a father”¹⁵ to your people.

Intense joys and intense sorrows are not unexpected flaws in our mortal journey, they are the essence of it. The growth we experience in this life is because of, not in spite of, our intense sorrows. The help we seek from God is in his very nature to give; what God “enjoys most about being God is the thrill of being merciful”¹⁶ because he is a God “filled with an infinite measure of holy, pure, and indescribable love.”¹⁷ As you wrestle with the ambivalence associated with mortality, trust the love of God to carry the day. It always has and it always will.

14. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Healing Power of Christ,” Oct. 1988, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1988/10/the-healing-power-of-christ?lang=eng>.

15. Gordon B. Hinckley, “To the Bishops of the Church,” Oct. 1988, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1988/10/to-the-bishops-of-the-church?lang=eng>.

16. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Laborers in the Vineyard,” Apr. 2012, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2012/04/the-laborers-in-the-vineyard?lang=eng>.

17. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Love of God,” Oct. 2009, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2009/10/the-love-of-god?lang=eng>.

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