

August 19–25 (1 Corinthians 1:20)

Uncommon Sense: How Christ’s Teachings Changed Everything

The Savior’s teachings may seem unconventional or foolish to the world, but to a disciple they provide answers, peace, and access to His love.

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Around six months before the Savior died—just following the bestowal of priesthood keys on Peter, James, and John upon the Mount of Transfiguration—the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matthew 18:1). In response, the Savior “called a little child unto him” and said, in part, “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:2, 4). This answer was likely the opposite of what the disciples were thinking.

Later in His ministry, Jesus echoed this teaching when He said, “And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant” (Matthew 20:27). In Jesus’s day, servants and children did not have social prestige. The Roman and Jewish leaders of the time, such as Herod, Pilate, and the Pharisees, were not subservient like children. And they weren’t servants—they *had* servants. To be like a child is to be humble, teachable, quick to forgive, and undesiring of position or authority. A servant helps others and is obedient to a master. These attributes were not common for secular leadership, yet they were what the Savior desired for leaders in His Church.

These teachings still apply in our time. In many cultures in the modern world, having a leadership position often means doing less and being served more. It often involves using others for the leader’s own gain. However, to be a leader in the Savior’s Church, you are called to work and serve more than you ever have before. Stephen W. Owen, Young Men General President, taught: “The world teaches that leaders must be mighty; the Lord teaches that they must be meek. Worldly leaders gain power and influence through their talent, skill, and wealth. Christlike leaders gain power and influence ‘by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned’ [Doctrine and Covenants 121:41].”¹

This was not the only surprising teaching the Savior presented. He was asked many questions by His followers and His enemies. His answers often shocked them, frequently contradicting what was considered customary. Many people today still see His teachings as foolish. But in truth, the opposite is true. Christ’s teachings showed just how flawed and “foolish the wisdom of this world” really is (1 Corinthians 1:20). Consider these uncommon principles He taught.





Service

Teaching what it meant to follow Him, Jesus said, “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 16:25). This explanation must have been confusing. How could I save my life by losing it?

President David O. McKay (1873–1970) explained: “Whenever you forget self and strive for the betterment of others, and for something higher and better, you rise to the spiritual plane. If . . . we will lose our self-centered self for the good of the Church . . . , for the good of the community, and especially for the progress of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we will be blessed spiritually, and happiness will be our reward.”² Instead of doing what may seem to be in our own best interest, the Savior invites us to act in the best interest of others.

Viewed this way, this uncommon teaching makes perfect sense. Giving up your life in service can lead you to find solutions and resolutions to your own complex problems. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught: “Often, the answer to our prayer does not come while we’re on our knees but while we’re on our feet serving the Lord and serving those around us. Selfless acts of service and consecration refine our spirits, remove the scales from our spiritual eyes, and open the windows of heaven. By becoming the answer to someone’s prayer, we often find the answer to our own.”³

Humility

The Savior often pointed out the vain attempts of the Pharisees and Sadducees to seek public recognition. He spoke of how they gave alms, prayed, and fasted to be seen of men (see Matthew 6:1–5, 16). He spoke of the scribes desiring the “salutations in the marketplaces” and “the chief seats in the synagogues” (see Mark 12:38–39).

The Savior instructed His disciples to do just the opposite: “Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted” (Matthew 23:12). Later, to one rich man He said, “Sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven” (Luke 18:22). What a difficult request if we equate personal wealth with personal value!

Today, we live in a world centered on individual success and wealth. We often hear that the ultimate goal in life is to be the best, the richest, or the most famous. The world tells us to climb the ladder of success, but the Lord invites us to humble ourselves and spend our days in His service. President Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) taught, “To the proud, the applause of the world rings in their ears; to the humble, the applause of heaven warms their hearts.”⁴ As disciples of Christ, we must beware of what many others seek—self-aggrandizement, “the honors of men” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:35), and “great riches” (Helaman 7:26).

Humility can open our lives to revelation and guidance from heaven. Elder Ulisses Soares of the Quorum of the

Twelve Apostles taught: “Those who are humble are able to acknowledge and understand the Lord’s answers to their prayers. . . . The humble are meek and have the ability to influence others to be the same. God’s promise to the humble is that He will lead them by the hand. I truly believe that we will avoid detours and sadness in our lives as long as we walk hand in hand with the Lord.”⁵

Forgiveness

Peter once asked the Savior, “Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). Peter likely thought he was being generous when he offered seven as an appropriate number of times one should forgive. How must he have felt, then, when Jesus responded, “I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until



seventy times seven”? (Matthew 18:22). Seventy times Peter’s generous amount! The Savior then offered a parable about a man who was forgiven of an astronomical amount of debt. The man in the parable was not punished when he had nothing to pay, but he was punished when he would not forgive a fellow servant. (See Matthew 18:23–35.)

The Savior’s teachings on forgiveness may still seem outrageous to many today. Culture often applauds those who seek to “get even” with those who have hurt them. When we feel injured, insulted, humiliated, or rejected by another person or group, we almost automatically look for ways to feel better. Often we are told that justice will be found in retaliating against the injuring party.

The Savior offers us a completely different path. “Love your enemies,” He taught, “bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). This counsel may seem like foolishness to some, but the Savior lived these principles. President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) taught: “The Lord never promised an easy road, nor a simple gospel, nor low standards, nor a low norm. The price is high, but the goods attained are worth all they cost. The Lord himself turned the other cheek; he suffered himself to be buffeted and beaten without remonstrance; he suffered every indignity and yet spoke no word of condemnation.”⁶ The Savior understands the roots of human happiness. Forgiveness can heal emotional wounds. Through forgiveness, we can exchange the burden of contention and anger for love and peace.

Sacrifice

The Savior told His Apostles, “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). This is a very unusual idea. Human life is much more valuable than the life of an animal. It would be senseless for a man to sacrifice his life for an insignificant sheep—unless the shepherd loved his sheep more than his own life.

Why then did Christ allow Himself to be sacrificed? Because He loves his sheep. And because it was more important to Him to fulfill His Father’s will than it was to preserve His own life.

*I marvel that he would descend from his throne divine
To rescue a soul so rebellious and proud as mine,
That he should extend his great love unto such as I,
Sufficient to own, to redeem, and to justify.⁷*

Christ’s teachings are still contradictory to much of what is taught in the world today. However, to the modern-day follower of Christ, these principles, though uncommon, make perfect sense indeed. ■

NOTES

1. Stephen W. Owen, “The Greatest Leaders Are the Greatest Followers,” *Ensign*, May 2016, 75.
2. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: David O. McKay* (2003), 86.
3. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Waiting on the Road to Damascus,” *Ensign*, May 2011, 76.
4. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson* (2014), 229.
5. Ulisses Soares, “Be Meek and Lowly of Heart,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2013, 10.
6. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball* (2006), 92.
7. “I Stand All Amazed,” *Hymns*, no. 193.