Of the many opportunities for service that come with my calling, in my estimation none exceeds the privilege of performing a sealing ceremony in one of the Lord's temples. Whenever I am in a beautifully appointed sealing room, facing a wholesome and anxious young couple about to make the most sacred of vows with God and with each other, I have the feeling that nothing I might say could do justice to the significance of that occasion in their lives.

At such times I frequently remember my own wedding day nearly twenty-six years ago and the strong feelings of love I had for my wife. I remember also our high expectations for the future. Kathy and I had an ideal in mind that was not necessarily peculiar to us: we were about to begin a companionship together that would be unparalleled in the romantic history of Western civilization!

Nevertheless, despite our best intentions and efforts, our ideal began to collide with reality shortly after our brief, inexpensive honeymoon. I cannot speak for Kathy, but I soon began to feel a small sense of disillusionment, a feeling that there was something more to marriage than I seemed capable of producing.

One small example from those early days of our marriage will illustrate the challenges we faced. We were living in Salt Lake City, where I was attending law school and Kathy was teaching first grade. Under the stress of being new to the city, our respective schools, and each other, our relationship became a bit testy. One night at about dinnertime, we had a quarrel that convinced me that I need not hope for nourishment at home. So I left our modest apartment and walked to the nearest fast-food restaurant, a block away. As I entered the north door of the establishment, I looked to my right—and much to my surprise, I saw Kathy entering through the south door! We exchanged angry glances and advanced to opposing cash registers to place our orders. We continued to ignore each other as we sat alone on opposite ends of the restaurant, sullenly eating our evening meals. We then left as we had entered and took our separate routes home. It wasn’t until later that we reconciled and laughed together about how infantile we had been.

I realize now that such little tiffs are not uncommon in the early stages of most marriages. However, I believe they are representative of the many obstacles that can frequently interfere with the tremendous potential for fulfillment and happiness that exists in an eternal marriage, potential that too often goes unrealized.

As the Restoration unfolded, the Prophet Joseph Smith did not teach the doctrine of eternal marriage until several years after the organization of the Church. When he began to do so, it was selectively.
Elder Parley P. Pratt, who had been married civilly thirteen years earlier, first heard about the concept of eternal marriage from the Prophet in Philadelphia in 1839. His reaction, as recorded in his autobiography, may be difficult to understand for those of us who have grown up with the anticipation of marrying in a temple for time and all eternity. This concept was completely new to Elder Pratt, however, and he was overwhelmed by it:

“I received from [Joseph] the first idea of eternal family organization, and the eternal union of the sexes in those inexpressibly endearing relationships which none but the highly intellectual, the refined and pure in heart, know how to prize, and which are at the very foundation of everything worthy to be called happiness.

“Till then I had learned to esteem kindred affections and sympathies as appertaining solely to this transitory state, as something from which the heart must be entirely weaned, in order to be fitted for its heavenly state.

“It was Joseph Smith who taught me how to prize the endearing relationships of father and mother, husband and wife; of brother and sister, son and daughter.

“It was from him that I learned that the wife of my bosom might be secured to me for time and all eternity; and that the refined sympathies and affections which endeared us to each other emanated from the fountain of divine eternal love. It was from him that I learned that we might cultivate these affections, and grow and increase in the same to all eternity; while the result of our endless union would be an offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, or the sands of the sea shore. …

“I had loved before, but I knew not why. But now I loved—with a pureness—an intensity of elevated, exalted feeling, which would lift my soul from the transitory things of this grovelling sphere and expand it as the ocean. I felt that God was my heavenly Father indeed; that Jesus was my brother, and that the wife of my bosom was an immortal, eternal companion; a kind ministering angel, given to me as a comfort, and a crown of glory for ever and ever. In short, I could now love with the spirit and with the understanding also” (Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1979, pp. 297–98).

In all of Latter-day Saint literature, I know of no more beautiful or powerful statement than this concerning the potential for fulfillment and happiness we have as we begin marriage together in the Lord’s way. The opportunity for such a companionship will eventually come to all who live worthy of it. Think of the implications of being able to love “with the spirit and with the understanding also.” Consider the power of the idea that of all people on earth, we Latter-day Saints know the most about genuine romantic love and have the greatest opportunity to achieve truly happy and enduring marriages. Will it not be a memorable day when as a people we are best known not just for our large families but for our truly exceptional marriages?

What are the eternal gospel principles that permit us to court one another and eventually establish marriages that are happy, fulfilling, and enduring? I will discuss a few truths that I feel are most vital. All of them are closely related to the Savior, his teachings, and the central role he plays in the gospel plan. In fact, if we want to make ourselves into worthy eternal companions, we can first concentrate on becoming unwavering disciples of the Master.
Developing Our Capacity to Love

The teachings of Christ suggest that we should begin our search for an eternal companion with greater concern about our ability to give love than about our need to receive it. Of the Savior, John wrote: “We love him, because he first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19).

Indeed, it may be our own capacity to give love that makes us most lovable. The greater our own personal substance is and the deeper our own mental, emotional, and spiritual reserves are, the greater will be our capacity to nurture and love others, especially our companion. President Marion G. Romney of the First Presidency posed a question that puts our ability to genuinely care about others in perspective: “How can we give if there is nothing there? Food for the hungry cannot come from empty shelves. Money to assist the needy cannot come from an empty purse. Support and understanding cannot come from the emotionally starved. Teaching cannot come from the unlearned. And most important of all, spiritual guidance cannot come from the spiritually weak” (Ensign, Nov. 1982, p. 93).

Very little love can come from one who is not at peace with himself or herself and God. As Enos learned, no one can be concerned about the welfare of someone else and give love to another until he or she has taken care of his or her own soul. Thus, our preparation for an eternal marriage must include repenting, learning, acquiring faith, and developing the security that comes with a vision of our potential as children of a Heavenly Father. Only when we love God above all others, as the Savior taught (see Matt. 22:34–40), will we be capable of offering pure, Christlike love to our companions for all eternity.

Virtue Loveth Virtue

A very natural and wonderful consequence of becoming a person capable of great love is described in this passage: “For intelligence cleaveth unto intelligence; wisdom receiveth wisdom; truth embraceth truth; virtue loveth virtue; light cleaveth unto light” (D&C 88:40).

If we pursue the goal of an eternal marriage with purity and with both our hearts and our minds, I believe in most cases we will eventually be rewarded with a companion who is at least our spiritual equal and who will cleave unto intelligence and light as we do, who will receive wisdom as we receive it, who will embrace truth as we embrace it, and who will love virtue as we love it. To spend the eternities with a companion who shares the most important fundamental values with us and who will discuss them, live them, and join in teaching them to children is among the most soul-satisfying experiences of true romantic love. To know that there will be someone who walks a parallel path of goodness and growth with us and yearns for the same eternal values and happiness is of great comfort.

I witnessed a powerful example of this principle recently as I sealed a young couple in the Salt Lake Temple. After I had performed the sealing ceremony and the couple had exchanged rings and embraces, I asked them to share their feelings about each other and the Lord. The new bride spoke first. Her brief remarks expressed both gratitude and emotion as she told how from her very youngest years she had desired to keep herself virtuous and had hoped to find a companion who shared her values and righteous aspirations. She confirmed the goodness of her new husband by witnessing that he was all she had hoped for and more.
Then the young husband spoke. He, too, was tearful as he shared how at age fourteen he had begun to pray to the Lord that the wife of his future, whoever she might be, would be protected and would keep herself virtuous while preparing for an eternal marriage. He also told how he had committed himself again and again over the years to that same path. Then he expressed his great joy at having met this wife of his prayers, and he mentioned his high hopes for a truly exceptional marriage.

This is the kind of relationship that our Heavenly Father wishes for all of his children. None of his faithful children will miss out on the opportunity for eternal marriage with one who is equally prepared for eternal life. Virtue loveth virtue! Truth embraceth truth!

**Bridling Passions**

The seeds of fulfilling romantic love are planted during courtship. During this time we should be mindful and appreciative of the truth and level of understanding reflected in Alma’s timeless counsel to his son, Shiblon: “See that ye bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love” (Alma 38:12).

Those of you who have grown up around horses, saddles, and bridles will perceive that Alma was not suggesting to Shiblon that he eradicate his passions but rather that he control or channel them for the very worthwhile purpose of being filled with love. During courtship, this control means deferring physical relations until they can properly blossom in marriage. But restraint and moderation are needed even in marriage, for the gospel teaches that “unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions” (D&C 88:38).

Married Latter-day Saints must remember that not everything the world condones and encourages in the expressing of romantic love has a place in an eternal marriage. In the words of Elder Boyd K. Packer, “the greatest deception foisted upon the human race in our day is … overemphasis of physical gratification as it is related to romantic love. It is merely a repetition of the same delusion that has been impressed on every generation in ages past. When we learn that physical gratification is only incident to, and not the compelling force of love itself, we have made a supreme discovery” (Eternal Love, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1973, p. 15).

As a righteous couple grow and mature in their love, they will come to know that the fine blending of the spiritual and physical dimensions of their relationship forms a solid foundation for their eternal union.

**Marriage Is a Priority**

Because the restored gospel reveals that eternal life with our Heavenly Father will be lived in family units, we would be wise to place a high priority in this life on preparing for and developing rewarding marriage relationships and roles as effective fathers and mothers. If we have been regarding too lightly the inspired counsel of the prophets on marriage, we may want to reorient our thinking. All the prophets in recent years have made powerful statements affirming that all who have the opportunity should work to attain eternal marriage and develop an eternal family unit.
Nevertheless, Satan will seek to have us do otherwise, and enticing voices will speak to us of worldly achievements and acquisitions that may lead us on dangerous detours from which we can return only with great effort. Small, seemingly insignificant choices along the way will have large consequences that will determine our eventual destiny.

My wife and I made an important choice early in our marriage when I was struggling as a first-year law student and she was overwhelmed by her first teaching position. We rarely met in all our individual comings and goings, and our relationship with each other was suffering noticeably. Even Sundays were burdensome as we tried to fulfill our Church callings and catch up on studies and school preparation. Finally, we sat down one evening and decided that if our marriage was a very important part of our lives, we had better start acting like it. We agreed to completely honor the Sabbath by refraining from all work, including our studies, and to devote ourselves to building a stronger marriage. We experienced an immediate surge in our feelings toward each other and noticeable improvement in other areas, including my grades and Kathy’s teaching. Twenty-six years later, we are still faced with many similar choices and issues. I hope and pray that we are resolving them in favor of the things that matter most.

**Perfection Is Gradual**

The Savior attained perfection by the following process: “He received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness” (D&C 93:13).

A recognition that the Savior’s perfection came gradually is comforting to two imperfect beings who are trying to make their marriage perfect. In my own case, I recently ventured to ask my wife a very risky question: “How am I doing?”

I was encouraged by her reply: “Well, I think you are nicer than you used to be.”

I believe that those of you who are walking around with a checklist of desirable fully perfected attributes in a prospective companion may come off empty-handed. Most of those attributes will be only in embryo when you are courting and will take most of a lifetime to perfect.

**Commitment**

Another gospel principle that significantly contributes to development of an eternal marriage is absolute commitment to our companions, as described by this scripture: “Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her and none else” (D&C 42:22).

Obviously, this also means that “Thou shalt love thy husband with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto him and none else.” None of us knows when we marry what life will bring in terms of health challenges, financial setbacks, or even transgressions. Giving ourselves to one another in an eternal marriage is an unconditional giving of the whole person for the whole journey.

Recently, I visited with a widower as he stood bravely at the side of his wife’s casket, surrounded by several handsome and stalwart sons. This man and his wife had been married for fifty-three years, during the last six of which she had been seriously ill with a terminal kidney disease. He had provided the 24-hour care she required until his own health was in jeopardy. I expressed my admiration...
for him and the great love and care he had given his wife. I felt compelled to ask, “How did you do it?”

It was easy, he replied, when he remembered that fifty-three years earlier, he had knelt at an altar in the temple and made a covenant with the Lord and with his bride. “I wanted to keep it,” he said.

In an eternal marriage, the thought of ending what began with a covenant between God and each other simply has little place. When challenges come and our individual weaknesses are revealed, the remedy is to repent, improve, and apologize, not to separate or divorce. When we make covenants with the Lord and our eternal companion, we should do everything in our power to honor the terms.

**Loving Kindness**

A final gospel truth that will contribute to our understanding of and hence the quality of our marriages relates to the degree in which we involve the Savior in our relationships as husbands and wives. As designed by our Heavenly Father, marriage consists of our first entering into a covenant relationship with Christ and then with each other. He and his teachings must be the focal point of our togetherness. As we become more like him and grow closer to him, we will naturally become more loving and grow closer to each other.

I have personally felt the mellowing influence of Christ’s example and teachings in my own marriage. I can vividly recall how easy it was to be accusing and judgmental and to find fault in the early years of my marriage. When I came home in the evenings having set the whole world in order, I would often wonder why Kathy in overseeing our young children was struggling with her few square feet in the kitchen. Then one day a wise teacher shared with me Nephi’s touching description of the Savior:

“And the world, because of their iniquity, shall judge him to be a thing of naught; wherefore they scourge him, and he suffereth it; and they smite him, and he suffereth it. Yea, they spit upon him, and he suffereth it, because of his loving kindness and his long-suffering towards the children of men” (1 Ne. 19:9).

I suppose “loving kindness” is a synonym for charity, or the pure love of Christ. I know that it is an absolutely essential ingredient in an eternal marriage and that romantic love cannot be separated from it or flourish without it. Loving kindness is a common thread in all the exceptional marriages with which I am acquainted, and it is the remedy for almost all marital problems.

I have only begun to scratch the surface of my topic; I have only hinted at discussing sacrifice, forgiveness, agency, and children, all of which are vital elements in a successful eternal marriage. I could never hope to do justice to doctrines and truths which, if followed, will enable us as husbands and wives to “pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to [our] exaltation and glory in all things, as hath been sealed upon [our] heads, which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever” (D&C 132:19).

If we will strive to love with understanding, the Spirit will teach us “all things what [we] should do”
(2 Ne. 32:5) to achieve an eternal marriage pleasing to the Lord. Under the influence of the Spirit, our sympathy and love for our eternal companions will deepen, and we will come to know a happiness and contentment in marriage that the world will never know.

No matter what our backgrounds or the quality of marriage our grandparents or parents enjoyed, we can in time and with the Lord’s help achieve the ideal. If our heritage includes a spiritually strong family with healthy marriages and close relationships, we will be able to build and even improve on the foundation that has been laid. If our heritage is not as strong, we can resolve that our children will receive a richer legacy.

Above all, I hope that we will vow never to be satisfied with a mediocre marriage. Not long ago a friend told me that one of his young children had asked, “Do you think Grandpa ever kisses Grandma?”

I certainly hope my wife and I are sufficiently in love and demonstrative about it that our grandchildren will not have to wonder. We can never afford to let our relationships become merely mutual toleration or accommodation.

Eternal marriage is godlike marriage. The term eternal describes the quality of marriage as much as its duration. What type of marriage would our God have? That is a question worthy of our contemplation.