

N. Eldon Tanner: An Example to Follow

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I want you students to know that when a few of the favored were being applauded earlier and I received no applause you made me feel like a social reject. You can correct that if you like. [laughter and applause]

I told someone tonight that when President Tanner called yesterday and asked if I would fill in for him—please note, not take his place but fill in for him—I thought that I could best relate my feelings by telling you that I know how Marc Wilson, a BYU second-string quarterback, felt when they asked him to go in for All-American candidate Gifford Nielson. Marc, I just hope I can do nearly as well as you did as a substitute.

I am very sorry that President Tanner is unable to be with us tonight. He has a very bad cold. I hope he will be the beneficiary of your faith and prayers.

I am very pleased to be with you to demonstrate to President Tanner and others that I would do anything for him—even this! Tonight gives me an opportunity to talk about a subject that is very close to me. As the contents of my remarks unfold, you will quickly realize that if President Tanner knew what I am going to speak about he would not have allowed me to fill in for him.

While attending a mission presidents' seminar in South America about three weeks ago, I had the opportunity of associating with mission presidents and their wives and some of the missionaries. The usual question they asked was, "How is President Kimball?" and when I assured them he was well and vigorous as usual they said, "Give him our love when you return." Following these comments one of the mission presidents said in an open forum where people, principles, policies, and purposes were discussed, "Tell us about President N. Eldon Tanner." On that occasion in South America I was impressed to say—and I probably say it with more conviction tonight than I did three weeks ago, "President N. Eldon Tanner will go down in history as one of the greatest counselors ever to serve in the First Presidency of the Church."

For more than fourteen years President Tanner has served with four different presidents of the Church: David O. McKay, Joseph

Marvin J. Ashton was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 4 December 1977.

Fielding Smith, Harold B. Lee, and Spencer W. Kimball. He will be eighty in May, and his performance today is solid and significant. As we think about the Christmas season, perhaps my gift to all of you would be the example of the life of President N. Eldon Tanner. Tonight I would like to share with you some of his traits and strengths, hoping that we can apply these principles in our daily lives for our total self-improvement.

First of all I would like to speak about the trait and strength of humility as I have found it in the life of President Tanner. As the First Presidency, the Council of the Twelve, and other General Authorities have met in the upper room of the temple on a once-a-month basis, President Kimball has never failed to call upon President Tanner to bear his testimony at the conclusion of these meetings. How often I have heard him say, "What am I doing here? I have so little to offer; I feel like I'm the least among you." In a spirit of true humility he asks, "What am I doing here? What do I have to offer?" and he will follow it by saying, "Nevertheless, I pray every night and morning for God to help me to do my part." I have heard him say, "All I want to do in God's kingdom is do what he wants me to do." In modestly accepting compliments I have heard him say, "Now why would anyone want to say that about me?"

President N. Eldon Tanner closely follows the 112th section of the Doctrine and Covenants, verse ten: "Be thou humble; and the Lord thy God shall lead thee by the hand, and give thee answer to thy prayers." We would serve ourselves and other well if we could humbly say, "I don't know why I've been called," or, if you please, "I don't know why I haven't been called, but I'm going to do the best I can." Brothers and sisters, students, leaders, do not let yourselves be concerned about your limitations or lack of talent; resolve positively with more vigor and determination tonight than ever before, "I may not be much;

I may not have much going for me, but in his strength I can do all things." As I think of the life of this great man, I see that humility is not a weakness; humility is a strength. I have often heard President Tanner say, "God cannot answer our prayers unless we are humble."

President N. Eldon Tanner is known by his associates in and out of the Church as Mr. Integrity, a man of character, a man of quality, an advocate of self-discipline. Frequently in conference he has admonished, "Be honest. Don't be a hypocrite. Be what you should be." He is a man of few words and much performance. I have never heard him make a cheap or shabby remark. I have never seen him when he was not a gentleman, when he was not the personification of integrity.

My first contact with President N. Eldon Tanner was in Canada more than twenty years ago. We had called a thirty-minute meeting for 7:00 p.m., prior to the other meetings, just to meet with the stake presidents. I remember well that night when seven o'clock arrived—two of us were there. I was there and a man I had never met before, a President Tanner. I will never forget the remark and the lesson that I learned as I looked at my watch, saw that it was seven o'clock and asked this man I had never met before, "President Tanner, what do you suggest we do?"

He looked at me and replied, "You're here; I'm here; it's seven o'clock. Let's start."

Another great character strength of President Tanner is that he is a friend to member and nonmember alike, a friend in the fullest sense of the word. He is a lifter, a builder, a leader. He is comfortable in any type of setting. I have never seen him when he did not fit and when he did not make other people, no matter what the circumstances, feel welcome and happy to be in his company. President Tanner is willing to take you and me from where we are and help us go forward from that point.

We learn another great lesson shared by his secretary, LeRue Sneff. She has said that on

occasion President Tanner has said to her, “In my office in the Church Office Building, I like to maintain such an atmosphere that those who come to call will go out feeling better than they did when they came in.” You and I should resolve to lift our associates under all circumstances. In this day and age we too need to resist the temptation or the practice of cutting people down, even if we think they deserve it. I have never heard President Tanner cut anyone down. But I have often heard him say, when someone has fallen or disappointed, “Let’s see what we can do to help him.”

Speaking of friends, wherever, whenever, however, I will not soon forget an experience that took place about this time last year. My phone rang. President Tanner was on the line and he said, “I have a letter here this morning from one of the inmates at the Utah State Prison. He wants to talk to me about something. Do you think you could arrange with the warden for me to talk with this inmate on the phone? I don’t think I’m going to have time to go and see him. Do you think you could arrange that?”

I said, “President Tanner, I think I can.” I have a few connections in the Utah State Prison. I have spent a lot of time there—as a visitor. And by talking with Warden Smith I arranged for this man to come out of maximum security and have the use of a telephone to talk to a President Tanner who had time for him. I do not know what they talked about; I just made the appointment. I shared this instance with you to let you know that this is the kind of a man N. Eldon Tanner is—a friend regardless of where we are or what we have done.

We had a recent experience with a missionary in a missionary conference, and I think it can tie in well to the attitude and strength of President Tanner. We had approximately seventy-five missionaries for this meeting. We took the time to give opportunity for testimony bearing. I remember only one testimony very

well. One young man stood up among his peers, grabbed hold of the front of the pew—I thought he was going to pull it out, he was so nervous—cleared his throat, and said, “I almost didn’t come on a mission. One night I said to my dad, ‘I don’t know about this Joseph Smith business. I’m not even sure about this Spencer W. Kimball. I’m not even sure I want to go.’” We all turned around and looked at him, wondering what was going to happen next. He said, “When I said that to my father, my father got up from where he was seated. He turned on the light. He walked over and turned off the television. He smashed out his cigarette. He put down his can of beer, and he said, “Son, you know I don’t do much about this church. You know I’m inactive, but I want you to know that I know Joseph Smith’s a prophet of God, and I know that Spencer W. Kimball is a prophet.’”

The elder said, “I love my dad. His comments made me want to go on a mission more than ever because I knew my dad would never be able to go and I had double duty to do. I’ve got to do a mission for myself and one for my dad.” How easy it would have been for him to say, “What chance do I have?” with a father who was completely inactive! I think of President N. Eldon Tanner when I think of that kind of a situation, of how many boys and girls he has helped to straighten their priorities and thinking so that family conditions and environment do not diverge their ways.

I would like to say a word or two about this great man as he relates to vision and vigor. A tireless, dedicated leader, he is about his Father’s business early and late. I say without reservation that I have never met a man with greater judgment or superior wisdom.

In an honor banquet in Salt Lake City last Thursday evening to recognize the lives and performances of J. Willard and Alice Marriott, for whom this building we meet in tonight is named, President Tanner, in paying one of the

tributes to these great members and friends of the Church, said,

It is not because of the money the Marriotts have made or the great number of hotels they have built that we respect them and admire them; it is because of the kind of lives they live. They have adopted the code, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you," and have lived it continually. The Church has benefited greatly by them and their aid in the building of temples, chapels, buildings, and other things and assisting worldwide in the great missionary effort.

Could we as students, as we pursue proper priorities with vision and vigor, recall President N. Eldon Tanner's comment that I have heard him make when there have been mighty decisions and responsibilities to perform: "All we have to do is what is right. "Thank the Lord that he believes in doing that which is right, rather than that which is only expedient.

President Tanner is a great husband, a wonderful father, and a worthy son. His loyal and supportive wife is his sweetheart and companion. All you have to do is be around President and Sister Tanner to see that they enjoy being with each other. She is his greatest advocate. Recently I heard one of their daughters say, "All through Daddy's life he has found time for us and has always made us feel important." President Tanner often gives thanks to a father and a mother who taught him to work and have lofty goals. He said, "My Father taught me the virtue of dependability." May I share with you a teaching experience that President Tanner had with one of his daughters and her girlfriend. President Tanner said,

Let me relate a little story that I have told all over the Church. My daughter and her girl friend were at our house, and they were going to a party; then two young men came and called for them. I sat and talked to them about different things, and just

before they were ready to leave, I said, "Now have a good time, kids." But just as they were going out of the door, I stepped over to my daughter and said, "Now, behave yourself."

And she said, "Well, Dad, make up your mind."

Then I said to those young people so they could all hear me, "Have a good time, kids, the best time you will ever have in your lives, but the kind of time that tomorrow, next week, a month from now or a year from now, ten years from now, you can look back on tonight and say, 'I had a good time' and have nothing to regret or to be sorry about."

And I think they went out and had a good time.

[N. Eldon Tanner, *Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God*, p. 3]

I wish we could learn that great lesson. How will you and I feel about today's conduct tomorrow? Give God the joy of loving you at your best.

President Tanner has been selfless in service. In responding to the tribute paid him by President Tanner and others, Brother J. Willard Marriott said, "President Tanner, you are a prime example of what a true Latter-day Saint can do for his Church. When you came to Salt Lake City from Canada as a General Authority you built a new home; before the paint was dry you were called to serve a mission in Europe. Your service to the Church has always been outstanding."

President Tanner has always taken the time to serve in the community, the home, and the Church, whether it has been convenient or not. He was elected to the Alberta, Canada, provincial government and was named Speaker of the House. He then served in the provincial cabinet as head of the Department of Lands and Mines, one of the most important positions in Canadian government. In Church and community businesses, his skill and wisdom continue to benefit millions. He is truly a man among men.

As I now read some well-known lines to you, would you please note how well they

meet the philosophy and creed of President Tanner. Also note how all of us, beginning today, can apply the truths and the challenges shared. Whenever I hear these words spoken or sung, I think of President N. Eldon Tanner.

*Have I done any good in the world today?
Have I helped any one in need?
Have I cheered up the sad, and made someone feel
glad?
If not, I have failed indeed.
Has any one's burden been lighter today,
Because I was willing to share?
Have the sick and the weary been helped on their
way?
When they needed my help was I there? . . .*

*There are chances for work all around just now,
Opportunities right in our way;
Do not let them pass by, saying , "Sometime I'll
try,"
But go and do something today.
'Tis noble of man to work and to give,
Love' labor has merit alone;
Only he who does something is worthy to live,
The world has not use for the drone.*

*Then wake up, and do something more
Than dream of your mansions above:
Doing good is a pleasure, a joy beyond measure,
A blessing of duty and love.
[Hymns, no. 58]*

President Tanner is a Christian gentleman; a courteous, kind, and capable prophet of God; a special witness of the Savior Jesus Christ; a man who rightly sits on the right-hand side of the prophet Spencer W. Kimball; a man whose declaration "I know President Spencer W. Kimball is a prophet of God" carries profound

significance, because who among earthly men knows the prophet better? I thank my Heavenly Father for the life and the example of President N. Eldon Tanner. I pray that all of us will try to incorporate in our lives the wonderful traits he exemplifies for us in his life. I would like you, brothers and sisters, to know that I love this great man with all my heart. I sustain and support him. I promise you success and happiness in life, each of you, if you will follow his example

I leave you my testimony that these are the things that are important in life; these are the gifts at Christmastime that are eternal. If I know President Tanner, the next few weeks will be spent visiting those who are not expecting him; maybe people like those who study under different conditions and with different challenges than you, even those at American Fork—those who have challenges mentally and physically. I have an idea that there are going to be people in that Utah State Prison who will hear from him. I am sure that he would encourage us at this Christmastime to make it a point to be friendly with an unfriendly neighbor, and I can hear him say, "The only unfriendly neighbors we have are those that we do not know very well." I think we will find him going to the hospital, writing letters to missionaries who do not have parents, calling on those who are widows and those who have tragedy come. These are the measures of greatness that we find in this wonderful man.

Again, let me thank you for the opportunity of being with you. I leave you my witness at this time of year that Jesus is the Christ and that God lives, and he knows you, and he wants to hear from you. These things I declare humbly and in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.