

# *Lessons from the Master*

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I am pleased to share with you the fact that the kingdom of our Heavenly Father rolls forward—not without challenges, not without hurdles, and not without the efforts of others to thwart or impede the progress of the Church.

## **Bringing A Message**

What a thrill it was last Thursday in the Salt Lake Temple to be on hand when President Howard W. Hunter was set apart as President of the Council of the Twelve and to have the members of the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve place their hands upon his head with President Benson being the voice. What a joy it was to be there on that occasion and feel of the Spirit and the love for this great man, President Howard W. Hunter—who at the present time is without his mobility but has a sweet spirit and an alert mind. He's a quorum president that I love, and I not only bring President Benson's love to you tonight, but also President Howard W. Hunter's.

Last Thursday I was impressed with the fact that while we conducted our normal business activities and cleared our agenda, trying to handle some of the affairs in our Heavenly Father's kingdom, President Benson said a number of times, "Thank God for good

people." In a day and age when it's disturbing to read and hear about the activities of people who are leaning in the direction of misconduct and mistrust, I bring you that message from our prophet as he met with his counselors and those in the Council of the Twelve: Thank God for good people. I feel the same way about you. I thank God for you and for what you do. I encourage all of us to be positive and appreciate the good and the good people around us.

## **Lessons of Love**

Let me now read a favorite scripture and ask you to remember it so we can refer to it later. You're all familiar with it, but you will never be as familiar with it as I would like you to be.

*Jesus went unto the Mount of Olives.*

*And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.*

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*And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,*

*They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.*

*Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?*

*This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not.*

*So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.*

*And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground.*

*And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.*

*When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?*

*She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.*

*Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.*

[John 8:1–12]

For as long as I can remember I've had a special love for Jesus Christ. I was taught he was the Son of the Living God. I was taught he was my friend, my teacher, and my strength. In years past, when the calling and responsibility and honor of bearing special witness of him have come into my life, I have endeavored to be taught by his life and his ways. Truly, he is the Master Teacher. To assist me in my labors and commitment, I have found myself turning frequently to the eighth chapter of John in the New Testament for strength, for guidance, and for example. If you please, let us walk through some of the verses to strengthen our lives and our relationships with Jesus. These lines and

words help me to better understand him and give me the desire to do and be more like him.

The first word: Jesus. I love the word *Jesus*. I love Jesus of Nazareth. It troubles me when I hear this sacred name used in vain. Do not allow yourselves to speak the word Jesus without reverence. Even though it's the world's way today to use that name in exclamation, in failure, to get attention, to curse, let us not allow ourselves to use the name Jesus without reverence.

I like the second word. I learn from it that Jesus *went*, he wasn't carried. He wasn't picked up. He wasn't conveyed. He went. Self-motivated. Self-disciplined. I love that word *went*. He sought privacy, seclusion for meditation, even in the Mount of Olives where he could ponder and pray and prepare. Early in the morning he was about his father's business. President Ezra Taft Benson has always started early, too. He knows how to—work and starts early. Early in his life he learned to pray, work, and study.

One early morning my telephone rang in the Church Office Building. I don't want to sound as if I'm boasting, but it was a little before seven in the morning. Some of us take a little longer to get in a day's work. And that familiar voice of President Spencer W. Kimball—weak, but powerful—said, "Marvin, could I come up to your office and see you?" And I said, "President Kimball, if you want to see me, I'll be right down." He said, "Would you do that?" (I could make a sermon on courtesy, but gather that from what I just said.) I was down in his office in thirty seconds. He handed me a letter. He said, "Would you read this and tell me what you think?" I suppose he's done this with a lot of us—asking for our opinion. My opinion isn't that special. I read it and said, "President Kimball, you might want to think about doing it this way." And, bless his heart, he said, "That's what I thought and that's what we'll do." I went back to my office and

felt fear and trembling and uneasiness for the rest of the day.

Just two or three weeks ago, President Benson phoned early in the morning. His greeting was, “Marv, I knew you’d be there.” Be early. Get a good start.

Jesus came *again*. It was a habit. It was a regular way of the day. A way of life. And all the people! He attracted people! All came. He was personable, wise, and kind. May I say for our encouragement and future patience in activities that *all* the people came. They were attracted to him, but not all were converted. Some remained enemies. Some remained bitter. Others were taught. We recall Luke’s record—so very well done.

*And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man. [Luke 2:52]*

Following up again on the beautiful scripture I love so much and am inclined to use as a guideline for my personal use, Jesus sat down on their level. He didn’t talk down. He didn’t talk up. He spoke to them as friends.

The Master Teacher taught on the mount, along the road, in the marketplace, in a boat, or on the shores—wherever and whenever as he lived. Can we sit down when we teach and communicate? He sat down and taught them. He didn’t threaten. He didn’t scold. He didn’t belittle. He humbly showed the way with parables, kindness, and great wisdom. Certainly he was not a scribe. He was the Son of God. He taught eye to eye, person to person, and heart to heart. He sat down.

May I recall, and some of you have heard this before—but may I repeat it? I had the opportunity of sitting down with the prophet once in an unusual circumstance. It is something I shall never forget. President Kimball called me one day and said, “I’d like to go to the Utah State Prison and visit for a limited time.” Without going into detail, the thing I think that prompted his request and his

motivation was something as simple as pure religion—going undefiled before God visiting the fatherless, the downtrodden, the weary, the prisoners. So we went to the Utah State Prison. He wanted to shake hands with a few, visit for a while, and then return to his office. When we arrived at the institution, the warden had arranged to have two prisoners in his office. There with President Kimball and the warden (just five of us with the door closed), I looked at these two criminals (and they looked the part) in silence. One was convicted of murder and the other of grand larceny. There they were in prison uniforms, looking at the floor. One was a member and the other a nonmember. The warden and I were sitting there waiting to see what President Kimball would do. What would he say? He could have said, “I’m sure ashamed of you two,” “What did you do to get here?” “How many times have you been here before?”

President Kimball looked at the one. He hadn’t even raised his eyes off the floor. President Kimball kept looking at him. Finally he looked up, and President Kimball said, “Tell me about your mother.” This prisoner told President Kimball about his mother. And when that was over, President Kimball looked at the other one (who was now looking up from the floor) and asked, “What does your father do?” Will Elder Ashton ever forget that moment? Instead of “You big dummy, you should have known better than that,” he said, “What does your father do?” The man told about his father, and it wasn’t very good. I was taught by a prophet. I saw a prophet with a Christ-like approach.

Now, back to the scripture. They brought unto him the woman taken in adultery. These enemies who would disturb, embarrass, ridicule, and display their cunningness—they tried to trick him. They sat her in the midst as an exhibit, as a sinner, as someone unclean. He didn’t flee from her presence. They called him “Master.” I become a little emotional because

I feel close to that situation where they approached him as “You who have all the answers, tell us.” They probed. They were unreasonable. She was taken in adultery—in the very act. There was no doubt about her guilt. They were setting him up in what appeared to be an impossible situation. Moses’ law says to stone her. “What sayest thou?” they asked, tempting him, trapping him—putting him in a no-win position.

Whatever he said, he would be accused of wrongdoing, wrong judgment. They were tempting him to see if they could get him to lose his patience and forget who he was. Stoning her would be cruel. Ignoring her would be wrong. Asking her to leave would be beneath him. He stooped down and wrote on the ground as though he heard them not (getting their attention and preparing everyone within earshot to be taught). We don’t know what he wrote on the ground with his finger. For our purposes here today we’ll say he was getting their attention while ignoring their cries for action and response. In your roles as leaders and students, having silent periods during interviews and counseling can be important. That silent period in this interview was so powerful. And while it was silent they continued asking. I can hear the questions of mischief: “C’mon, say something. We’ve got you. Are you afraid to answer?” But Jesus was in charge. Soon this would be evident, but the quiet period had to go on a little bit longer.

Jesus lifted up himself, in humble and meek majesty, and said these most powerful words: “He that is without sin among you let him first cast a stone at her.” A perfect answer from a perfect person.

Today in our responsibilities, situations, and callings, we need to be reminded of this over and over again. In our dealings with all people, let him who is without sin be the first to criticize or find fault or belittle or be the first to stone someone’s character. He stooped down and wrote on the ground. They heard what he

said. They felt the impact of his silence of spirit while he said nothing. Convicted by their own conscience they left on their own, not driven away. They went out one by one—not to find stones, but to nurse their spiritual wounds.

He was left alone with the woman. I’m glad that’s recorded. Some of us are inclined to avoid being with those who have fallen. They’re beneath or below us. Left alone with the woman, he said, “Where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee?” He was involving her in the interview and teaching at the same time. Jesus Christ took time to ask and to listen. Oh, if we could do more of that! Our answers would be so easy, so much improved.

I recall a few years ago we had a call from a stake president. He said, “I haven’t been able to resolve this situation. Would you be good enough to help us?” We arranged a time and met with a young man from Brigham Young University—265 pounds, an all-conference tackle—and his mom and his dad. This young man was a sophomore with two more years of football to play. His mom thought it would be nice if he played football, but his dad wanted him to go on a mission. The more interviews there were, the more confusion there was. After the usual greetings, I looked at the mother by the side of this football player big enough to pull a plow and said, “Do I understand right that you favor your son’s playing football?” She said, “Yes, I think I lean in that direction.” I looked at the father and said, “Am I right in assuming you would like to have your son go on a mission at this time?” He said, “Yes, I lean in that direction.” So I looked at the football player and said, “What would *you* like to do?” He said, “I’d like to go on a mission.” I said, “Why don’t you?” The interview was over and he went on a mission! I love those difficult situations! How much fun I could have had if I’d spent a half hour arguing about which comes first and when, how, and where.

The woman taken in adultery answered the Lord's question regarding her accusers by saying, "No man, Lord." And then this powerful declaration came: "Go, and sin no more." The Master was teaching in that day and also teaching in this very hour. His great message: Despise the sin, but love the sinner. I hope that can give us strength and confidence and a closer relationship to our Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus did not condone adultery. He gave the woman love instead of an authoritative lecture. She and the accusers needed a lesson in love. The situation called for mercy and compassion. How rewarding it is to know that Jesus believed that man is greater than all of his sins. Is it any wonder he was referred to as the "Good Shepherd?" He loved all of his sheep whether they were strays, hungry, helpless, cold, or lost.

### **Christ's Own Testimony**

At the conclusion of this great teaching experience, this lesson of love and compassion, is an important verse.

*Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.*  
[John 8:12]

Let us follow his light. Let us refer often to these few words. I bear witness to you that they were preserved for the good of everyone within the sound of my voice. We shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

Later on in this same chapter of John, in verse twenty-five, after the Pharisees had been with the Savior and were confounded, confused, impressed, and touched, they were heard to say, "Who art thou?" And his simple answer was "the same that I said unto you from the beginning."

Recall Peter's answer when Jesus asked, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?"

The disciples replied, "Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets." Then Jesus asked, "But whom say ye that I am?" (Matthew 16:13–15; emphasis added).

I challenge you with that question tonight. Whom say ye that Jesus Christ is?

*And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.*

*And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.*

*And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* [Matthew 16:16–18]

Let us have our answer when the question comes to us or pops up in our minds: "Who art thou?" Let us know with each passing day who he is and live closer to him.

Another of my favorite verses is also in the eighth chapter of John. After this series of teachings and experiences, with people asking who he was and what his purpose was and trying to trick him and embarrass him, I suppose Jesus came to the point where he thought, What do I have left to say to them? My life and my ways don't seem to affect them. In verse twenty-six, at the climax of this story, Jesus said, "He that sent me is true" (John 8:26).

Jesus Christ was bearing his testimony that God is real and that his ways are true and right. I would like to have us remember that when we don't seem to have all the answers and we're not very effective in communicating the feelings of our hearts through words, we should go to the scriptures, where we have a powerful ally in testimony and testimony sharing. We may not have all of the answers yet. But I want you to know that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is true. And if



nothing else seems to influence or affect you, remember that I have this testimony and I know it is true. A testimony is a priceless possession, and it's peculiar and valuable only in this great church of ours. Don't ever forget its importance. When all other channels seemed to be plugged with poison prejudice, Jesus bore his testimony.

**"If Ye Continue"**

God the Father has not left us alone. We have membership in the church of Jesus Christ. Do the things that please him, and you will have joy in him and in yourself.

*If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;*

*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. [John 8:31–32]*

I love that word *continue*. If you continue, you are his disciple. Some missionaries—past and present—have felt that to be a disciple you have to be an assistant to the president or a zone leader or a senior companion. The truth is that all you have to do in missionary work or in life to be a disciple is to continue. I want you ladies to know that continuing is more important than earning the crown of human approval. All of us can continue. Not all of us may be called to positions of heavy and mighty responsibility. But it gives satisfaction to me—and I hope to you, too—to know that the final test is "are you continuing and will you continue?"

I was out with the missionaries last week. After we had had some discussions and presentations, we opened up a question-and-answer period. That's always a little fun and a little dangerous. One missionary said, "Did your patriarchal blessing say you were going

to be an apostle?" I've been asked that question before, incidentally. Because I've been asked that before—and because I've put in proper perspective what the real blessings are, what it means to continue—I carry with me one little verse or paragraph from my patriarchal blessing. And I take satisfaction in repeating it here tonight with my sweetheart at my side. She's never heard me read this from my patriarchal blessing in public before. So brace yourself, Sister Ashton. I share this only to emphasize the fact that callings and offices are not as important as family, and continuing, and love, and compatibility.

*I also bless thee, Brother Ashton, through prayer and humility of heart thou shalt be provided with a companion in life whose heart and spirit shall be in harmony with thine, and that together you will provide a home that shall be a place of safety, a haven of rest, a sanctuary wherein the spirit of the gospel and the spirit of love shall remain supreme.*

I'm so glad that blessing was pronounced and made available to me for ratification if I lived worthily for it. The family, the home, the continuing make us disciples—not titles or honors.

Not only do I know Jesus Christ as the Master Teacher, our Redeemer, our Savior, and the Only Begotten of the Father—I know him in ways that touch my soul and give me daily direction. God lives. He is our father. He loves us. Jesus is the Christ. This is his church. Jesus is the light and the way. I leave you my blessing and thank you for being here tonight. I hope and pray that in some small way we can go forward from tonight with a closer association and appreciation for Jesus Christ. And I pray this in his name. Amen.