

# *“To Thine Own Self Be True”*

ROBERT L. BACKMAN

In 1982, on the fourth day of the National Spelling Bee, eighty-five of the 137 contestants were eliminated, including Andrew Flosdorf. The word that got him was “echolalia.” When Andrew had spelled it, he had mistakenly substituted an “e” for the first “a.” I mention Andrew, specially, though, because the judges misunderstood him and thought he had spelled the word correctly. It wasn’t until after the round when some of Andrew’s friends asked him how to spell his word that he learned his mistake.

He gulped back his tears and went right to the judges, who had to eliminate him. It was hard to do, but Andrew said, “I didn’t want to feel like a slime.”

Chief judge of the event, Robert Baker, said, “We want to commend him for his utter honesty.”

So did the world, it seemed. Suddenly the thirteen-year-old was besieged by reporters requesting interviews and appearances on network television. Andrew was surprised by all the attention. “The first rule of Scouting is honesty,” he said.

But we live in a world that gives attention to rare events. The old journalistic saw is that it’s no news when the dog bites the man, but if the man bites the dog, start the presses. And

honesty, especially in cases where the stakes are as high as they were for Andrew, has become rare enough to make the news. Unfortunately, we have become conditioned to dishonesty. “Lie a little here.” “Cheat a little there.” “It’s okay,” too many say. “Everybody does it.”

## **Honesty Starts with Ourselves**

The day that everybody really does do it, we are in big trouble. If our nation ever falls, it won’t be because a better system has been developed. It will be because our own system has become overburdened with dishonesty and laziness. As Paul Harvey said, “We don’t need new religions. We don’t need new ethics. We don’t need a new system; we need only to make honest the one we have” (Paul Harvey News, American Broadcasting Company, Chicago, Illinois).

“Everybody does it.”

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*Robert L. Backman was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 23 October 1984.*

But there are some things that everybody ought not to do, and the place to start in making a change is with ourselves. Someone has said, “When I repent there is one less rascal in the world!”

William D. Brown, a clinical psychologist from Washington, D.C., put together an ethics test for *Success Magazine* that is worth thinking about. Let me pose to you just some of the questions he asks in this test (*Success Magazine*, December 1982, p. 30).

**First**, do you give a full day’s work for a full day’s pay? The lack of productivity among American workers has observers anxious on all sides. Someone somewhere is not working at work to his fullest capacity. Is that you?

**Second**, asks Brown, do you ever take office items, even small ones, for personal or family use? Pencils, erasers, and notepads have a way of disappearing from offices. One grocery attendant leaned over to another and whispered that he was going to call a long-distance sports quiz number on his employer’s phone. That is the same kind of thing. We can’t rationalize that it won’t matter if we take just one item home since the company has so many of them. That is not so. It does matter.

**Third**, do those who know you consider your word your bond—even your family? Do you keep your promises? Are you there when you say you’ll be there? Or are your promises, as Mary Poppins said, “Piecrust promises—easily made and easily broken.” Do you pledge things you don’t mean, just to get yourself off the hook? In the end, these kind of false promises put us on the hook as people learn not to trust us.

**Fourth**, would your friends describe you as a loyal and faithful friend to them? We all have bushels of acquaintances, but a friend is a rare commodity. That is because a real friend requires a commitment of time and energy. We have to be there to share joys and sorrows. And we have to be the kind of person another can trust with confidences. Can others let down

their veneer of safety and share their vulnerabilities with you and know you will love them just the same and it will go no further?

**Fifth**, do you strive to remain honest in all interactions? Honesty is a habit that has to be acquired like anything else that is really worthwhile. Let’s face it. When we are tempted to be dishonest, it is often to save face. We want to appear better than we are. We want to pretend we’ve done the job. Or sometimes we simply want to make our life more convenient. These are very human tendencies that we simply have to weed out of our lives.

**Sixth**, if your spouse’s emotional and physical fidelity were equal to yours, would you be satisfied? Let me tell you what Brown says about this.

*Days of the “double standard” in marriage are gone for good, and thoughtful men and women will say, “good riddance!” It is important for both sexes to recognize that fidelity underscores commitment, without which a relationship couldn’t survive. [Success Magazine, p. 31]*

And emotional fidelity is just as important. We have to learn to put the needs of our spouse above all other things, and not let business or other people supersede that relationship.

**Seventh**, do you really treat others both at home and away from home the way you want to be treated? It is sometimes easy for us to be polite and charming to people outside our home, but are we as good to the people who live there? Do our families ever receive the benefit of our courtesy, our good cheer? It is essential that they do.

And it is also important to treat the stranger we will never see again with the courtesy we would shower upon our most influential friend. Think about how you treat other drivers on the street, someone who wants the same parking place you do when it’s the last one on the block, or the clerk at the store when you are in a hurry.

These questions we've been asking ourselves bear very strongly on our personal integrity, and our integrity will bear very strongly on our personal success in this life. Virtue is not only its own reward; it rewards us in tangible ways every day we practice it.

### **"This Above All"**

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Laertes was embarking on a journey to foreign lands. Polonius, his father and lord chamberlain, a windbag and busybody, nevertheless gave him some sound advice that applies to all of us. He said, "This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man" (*Hamlet*, act 1, sc. 3, lines 78–80).

To thine own self be true!

Jesus said, "For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?" (Luke 9:25).

To sell our integrity is to sell life itself.

It is not easy to stand up for what you believe in. It never has been, and it is no accident that the world is set up this way. Otherwise, how could you tell if you had integrity or not?

Walter Lippman wrote, "[A person] has honor if he holds himself to an ideal of conduct though it is inconvenient, unprofitable, or dangerous to do so" (*A Preface to Morals* [Time Inc.: New York, 1964], p. 209).

Doing the right thing when it is also the easy thing or the profitable thing is not a sign of integrity. That's like high jumping without a crossbar. Anybody can do it. David O. McKay said that the greatest battles of life are fought within the silent chambers of the human heart. He was right. Those are the real battles of life or death.

The victories and defeats of those inward battles show themselves in our outward actions.

It has been said that after about age forty, each of us pretty much deserves the face we are wearing. We designed it from the inside.

That's part of what makes life exciting. We can be anything we want to be, but we must build solidly on a foundation of honor and integrity.

I've often wondered when it comes to honesty if there are any little things or little issues. The smallest wedge can penetrate the psychological barrier against dishonesty, and once broken, it is easier to break again until dishonesty is a habit. We may even abandon it eventually as an ideal. If that ever happens, individually or collectively, our quality of life will slip drastically. Dishonesty does not pay—it always costs!

Hi Nelson wrote a story about a boy named Jack who found out just how much it cost.

*"One more test and I'm finished—graduated!" thought Jack. He shuffled into the last seat in the corner. It was cooler there. The window was wide open and every now and then, when he felt like resting his mind, he could look out and daydream.*

*He had little to worry about. He had studied hard. Besides, his marks had been high all term.*

*Test papers were passed out and then the last nervous chuckles and jokes came to an end.*

*Just then Jack noticed Ted Zorens. He was sitting right across the aisle. As Jack tackled the first few questions, he glanced over at Ted now and then.*

*Jack could tell that Ted was in trouble. Obviously he hadn't studied for the exam, but that was not unusual. He was so good at spotting the answers on the other students' papers that his friends called him "Obie," short for Old Binocular Eyes.*

*Jack could hear Ted's fingers tapping nervously on the desk top. If Ted flunked this exam, he wouldn't graduate.*

*But luck was with him. A girl student on the other side of the room was sick. The pressure of the exam was too much for her. She had been too*

*nervous to eat breakfast that morning. Now she felt faint.*

*As the teacher called an assistant for help, Ted made his move. He passed Jack a note, "Just list the twenty short answers."*

*Jack hesitated only an instant. Ted was his friend. No one was caught; no one was hurt; Ted graduated.*

*Jack lost touch with Ted after graduation. Not until fifteen years later were they to meet again.*

*Jack was a salesman. He had been driving for eight hours straight. He fell asleep at the wheel and his car slammed into a tree. Jack was barely conscious as the ambulance screamed through traffic.*

*The stretcher-bearers rushed him into the operating room for surgery. He heard the voice of the surgeon. "Don't worry, you'll be fine. I'm Dr. Ted Zorens."*

*As Jack went under the anesthesia, he could hear the nervous tapping of fingers. [Hi Nelson, "Who Needs a Cheater at a Time Like This?"]*

#### **At the Mercy of Things That Matter the Least**

Have you ever noticed that when everybody knows something or says something or adopts a certain standard, the pressure is overwhelming to do the same? If everybody acts a certain way, the sheer numbers may urge you to act the same way. If everybody adopts a certain attitude, it is far easier to yield to the group than stand aside, lonely and apart. But I've been overwhelmed as I've watched through the years how often popular opinion is untrue.

Take that favorite childhood story about Pieter, the Dutch boy who stuck his finger in the dike and saved the area from flooding. We Americans tell that story to our children to remind them how important it is to be brave. Unfortunately, the story is simply an American invention. No Dutchman ever heard of brave little Pieter. But now comes the really interesting twist. So many American tourists to Holland asked about Pieter that the Dutch decided it was only sensible to erect a statue in

his honor. So today, in a town near Amsterdam, there is a statue to Pieter, who never existed at all, except in the minds of American parents and children.

Of course, to follow popular opinion about some story may not be serious. But to follow popular opinion about moral behavior or long-range goals could lead you to imperil your very eternal life. Think about the choices you make every day. Are they based on popular opinion or your deepest values?

Too many of us get caught in monkey traps!

In parts of Africa the natives capture monkeys in a unique way. They lop the top off a coconut, clean out the meat, anchor the coconut to the ground and place a peanut in the empty shell. Then they leave. You know how monkeys love peanuts. They smell the peanuts and cannot resist reaching into the coconut to grab the peanut. But holding the peanut in their paw, the monkeys can't get the doubled-up paw out of the small hole in the top. The natives return with gunnysacks and pick up the trapped monkeys, who fight, bite, scream, kick, and do everything in the world but the one thing that would save their lives—let go of the peanut.

Have you ever been caught in a monkey trap where the things that matter the most are at the mercy of things that matter the least?

For instance, what do you do for recreation? Do you go to the movie that everybody's talking about this week, even though the language is profane, the story immoral? Have you learned to unconsciously adopt the values of the crowd, thinking it is more important to find out who won Miss America than what is found in the Bible? Popular opinion holds a tremendous power over our recreational choices and our values, often leading us to compromise ourselves.

How about your goals? Are they influenced by popular opinion or by eternal values? Most of us may find that we compromise ourselves there, too. We learn to envy those who are

served in the world instead of those who do the serving. When we dream of the future, we hope for wealth and power rather than eternal life. The Lord has outlined a remarkable goal for us in the scriptures. He says:

*It shall come to pass that every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me, and calleth on my name, and obeyeth my voice, and keepeth my commandments, shall see my face and know that I am. [D&C 93:1]*

The Lord has said we can see his face, but too often we ignore that great promise and fix a goal for ourselves gleaned from popular opinion. We want to be well liked and have lots of fun. We want to be good-looking and showy. That's a goal based on compromise—giving up the eternal values for the things that will not and cannot last.

How about your conversations? Do you compromise yourself when you talk? We all know how important it is to be kind and charitable, to withhold judging another. But in the thick of a conversation, how easy it is to compromise, to be unkind or critical. How easy to laugh at a joke you know should never have been told.

### **It's Easy to Follow a Cow Path**

The reason that the road leading to heaven is straight and narrow is probably because it is not a popular path. It is a difficult one, and those who must follow popular opinion against their conscience may find the road set steep. They like this lazy cow path described in a poem by Sam Walter Foss instead.

*One day through the primeval wood  
A calf walked home as good calves should;*

*But made a trail all bent askew,  
A crooked trail as all calves do.*

*This forest path became a lane,*

*That bent and turned and turned again;*

*This crooked lane became a road,  
Where many a poor horse with his load*

*Toiled on beneath the burning sun,  
And travelled some three miles in one.*

*And men two centuries and a half  
Trode in the footsteps of that calf.*

*For men are prone to go it blind  
Along the calf-paths of the mind,*

*And work away from sun to sun  
To do what other men have done.*

[Sam Walter Foss, "The Calf-Path," *Whiffs from Wild Meadows*, (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1898), pp. 77–80]

Our lives were not meant to be cow paths where we blindly follow whoever went first. If we base our actions on what other people do or think, in the end we will be abandoned. We will pay a steep price for the momentary comfort of following the crowd, assuming mob values. An individual cannot imitate others without giving up something of himself.

A man told this story about his youth. It seems that when he was seventeen, he used to run with a gang of boys who had great times together. One night after they had been together, he heard the shouting of excited people coming toward his house. Being curious, he dressed and went downstairs to discover that a mob was approaching. It was not long until it arrived and from it sprang three or four of his friends, all members of the gang. One of them said to him, "Come with us, Joe. This man has hurt a girl and we're going to lynch him." Before Joe could ask any questions, they grabbed him by the arms and he was swept along in a swirling, shouting sea of humanity.

A mile from his house was a large oak tree. Almost before he knew what was happening, the mob had placed a rope around the accused man's neck, placed him on a horse, and thrown the rope over the limb of a tree. The moment of death had arrived. Have you ever known such a moment when important things weigh in the balance?

A profound silence came over the mob. The last details of the lynching had been completed. Quite by chance or by the force of circumstance, Joe found himself right next to the horse. Suddenly, the leader—and every mob has such a leader—shouted at him. “Joe, kick that horse and let's get this thing over with.” The tension within Joe could not be described. He'd never seen this man before. But here Joe was with all these people watching him, anxious for him to carry out the command. He felt the pressure as he hesitated, but then, blinded by emotion and the desire to have the approval of the mob, he kicked the horse. The man met his death.

The next day the mob discovered that they had lynched an innocent human being. This man had had nothing to do with the alleged crime. And for sixty-five years Joe tried to find peace. He wished again and again in the agony of his soul that at the moment when the mob took him along and he found himself by the side of the horse he had had the ability and courage to live as his conscience dictated.

But from his agony and suffering he reported that he learned many things. He learned that some people try to have many consciences. “This is the way I act with the gang because I want their approval. And this is the way I act in school or at work. This is the way I act in church, but this is the way I act on Saturday night.”

General Douglas MacArthur described it as “The roar of the crowd on one hand and the voice of our conscience on the other.” The fact is that if any of us try to live with several consciences we will be made miserable in the end.

In the thick of life, compromising our standards may seem the easiest route, but in the end we are painfully diminished. In a world of constantly changing standards, it is never good enough to say, “Everybody does this, so I can, too.” Instead we have to use that unchanging standard for our life's conduct: *What would the Savior do?*

All of our lives we face tests of character.

And while, if we have been taught well, we are sure we want to be honest, courageous, and compassionate, life does not present us our character tests in calm, unhurried moments so we can respond how we hope we would. Instead, in the midst of worries, pressures, and frustrations, a test of character is slipped in, and we might not even recognize it for what it is. Temptations rarely announce themselves as such. Tests of character are never so obvious, saying, “Now let's see what you're made of.” Instead, our tests wear masks to disguise themselves, and if we should slip and fail, then we may not even recognize our mistake. It is so easy to rationalize, “I had to respond that way because life was tough on me just then.”

It is relatively easy for any of us to respond well when life is not frustrating or challenging us. We can pass our tests of character with flying colors when anxiety or exhaustion aren't nailing us to the wall. But the real test is how we respond amidst the traumas and problems of everyday life, not how we can be temporarily when life is easy. When we hear about a test of character we can think of just the right way to act, but can we be that way when we are in the midst of it, and no one told us that this was a character test?

He who has a strong character can pass his tests as well in foul weather as in sunny. In fact, like a fair-weather friend, a fair-weather test is almost no test at all.

So life will confront us with temptations, with tests of character, and we have no guarantee that they will come when we are most able to handle them.

### Prepare to Pass the Tests

How can we be prepared to handle them when they do come, then? Perhaps we can learn a lesson from our physical bodies. To be able to pass tests of physical strength and stamina, we have to keep our bodies physically fit. This requires a certain amount of consistent effort from us, often directed toward a certain goal. If we want to run a mile, we start out by walking it first and then working our way toward our goal. We don't eat junk food that would subvert our health; we watch our nutrition, knowing that we become what we eat.

### To Pass a Test

To pass life's character tests takes similar effort and consistent work. How, otherwise, can we expect character fitness? This work usually falls into three areas.

First, we need to expose ourselves to examples of good behavior so that we can recognize it when we see it. Like the star a mariner chooses to guide his ship at night, so can our good examples guide us through the murkiness of the world. People whose qualities are worthy of emulation fill the scriptures, great literature, and history.

Noble hearts are all around us if we but look. Let us concentrate our minds and hearts on these examples, rather than indiscriminately mimicking whatever images the world hands us.

Second, let us decide in advance how we will respond to our character tests. Often when the moment is upon us we have lost our perspective and take the course of least resistance. The advance decision puts us in control of our responses rather than making us mere reactors to the pressures of the present.

Winston Churchill, that grand old hero of World War II, declared: "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense" (Address at Harrow School, 29 October 1941).

Third, we need to pray for help to recognize those moments of decision when our character hangs in the balance. We need to find the strength to carry out in the storm those decisions made when life was calm. Richard L. Evans noted, "If you don't want temptation to follow you, don't act as if you are interested" (*Thoughts for One Hundred Days*, vol. 5 [Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1972], p. 87). The Lord can help us know temptation when we see it so we don't become interested.

*When in the dim beginning of the years,  
God mixed in man the raptures and the tears  
And scattered thru his brain the starry stuff,  
He said, "Behold! Yet this is not enough,  
For I must test his spirit to make sure  
That he can dare the Vision and endure.*

*"I will withdraw my Face,  
Veil me in shadow for a certain space,  
Leaving behind Me only a broken clue—  
A crevice where the glory glimmers thru,  
Some whisper from the sky,  
Some footprint in the road to track Me by.*

*"I will leave man to make the fateful guess,  
Will leave him torn between the No and Yes,  
Leave him unresting till he rests in Me,  
Drawn upward by the choice that makes him free  
Leave him in tragic loneliness to choose,  
With all in life to win or all to lose."*  
[Edwin Markham, "Man-Test," *Poems of Edwin Markham*, sel. Charles L. Wallis (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), p. 5–6]

My prayer in behalf of you noble young men and women who have the future of the world in your hands is "This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man." That is my testimony to you, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.