

Think on Christ

EZRA TAFT BENSON

My beloved brothers and sisters, I always rejoice at the opportunity to visit this campus. It is truly an inspiration to be in your presence. I love the youth of the Church. I have great confidence in you. It is my belief that the Lord has held many of you in reserve in the spirit world to come to earth at this particular time when temptations are the greatest and strength of character is most needed.

The Lord loves you and has favored you with a royal birthright.

We have just completed another glorious conference of the Church. We are all thankful to the Lord for the blessing of strength given to President Kimball and President Romney which enabled them to be present in two sessions of conference. We are thankful for the inspiration and counsel given by the General Authorities who spoke. I hope you will take occasion to review the wisdom and counsel of their messages.

The Product of My Thoughts

To introduce my theme today, I want to tell you, in his own words, of a life-changing experience that happened to President George Albert Smith when he was a boy. His own words are as follows:

As a child, thirteen years of age, I went to school at the Brigham Young Academy. . . . I cannot remember much of what was said during the year that I was there, but there is one thing that I will probably never forget. . . . Dr. [Karl G.] Maeser one day stood up and said:

“Not only will you be held accountable for the things you do, but you will be held responsible for the very thoughts you think.” Being a boy, not in the habit of controlling my thoughts very much, it was quite a puzzle to me what I was to do, and it worried me. In fact, it stuck to me just like a burr. About a week or ten days after that it suddenly came to me what he meant. I could see the philosophy of it then. All at once there came to me this interpretation of what he had said: Why of course you will be held accountable for your thoughts, because when your life is completed in mortality, it will be the sum of your thoughts. That one suggestion has been a great blessing to me all my life, and it has enabled me upon many occasions to avoid

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thinking improperly, because I realize that I will be, when my life's labor is complete, the product of my thoughts. [Sharing the Gospel with Others (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1948), pp. 62–63]

Thoughts lead to acts, acts lead to habits, habits lead to character—and our character will determine our eternal destiny.

King Benjamin understood this. In the next-to-last verse of his great discourse recorded in the Book of Mormon, he states:

And finally, I cannot tell you all the things whereby ye may commit sin; for there are diverse ways and means, even so many that I cannot number them. [Mosiah 4:29]

Then in the last verse he counsels that we must watch ourselves and our thoughts (see Mosiah 4:30)

When Christ appeared in America following His resurrection, He stated:

Behold, it is written by them of old time, that thou shalt not commit adultery;

But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman, to lust after her, hath committed adultery already in his heart.

Behold, I give unto you a commandment, that ye suffer none of these things to enter into your heart. [3 Nephi 12:27–29]

“Enter into your heart”—why, of course, for, as the scripture states: “As he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7).

So critical is it that we understand the necessity of controlling our thoughts that President Spencer W. Kimball devoted a whole chapter to it in his book *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. The chapter caption “As a Man Thinketh” is the title of a book by James Allen, which President Kimball recommended. He quoted from this book three times. One quotation stated:

A man does not come to the almshouse or the jail by the tyranny of fate or circumstance, but by the pathway of groveling thoughts and base desires. Nor does a pure-minded man fall suddenly into crime by stress of mere external force; the criminal thought had long been secretly fostered in the heart, and the hour of opportunity revealed its gathered power. Circumstance does not make the man; it reveals him to himself. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969, p. 105]

President Kimball also quotes President David O. McKay, who said:

The thought in your mind at this moment is contributing, however infinitesimally, almost imperceptibly to the shaping of your soul, even to the lineaments of your countenance. . . . even passing and idle thoughts leave their impression. [Ibid.]

The mind has been likened to a stage on which only one act at a time can be performed. From one side of the wings the Lord, who loves you, is trying to put on the stage of your mind that which will bless you. From the other side of the wings the devil, who hates you, is trying to put on the stage of your mind that which will curse you.

You are the stage manager—you are the one who decides which thought will occupy the stage. Remember, the Lord wants you to have a fullness of joy like His. The devil wants all men to be miserable like unto himself. You are the one who must decide whose thoughts you will entertain. You are free to choose—but you are not free to alter the consequences of those choices. You will be what you think about—what you consistently allow to occupy the stage of your mind.

Sometimes you may have difficulty driving off the stage of your mind a certain evil thought. To drive it off, Elder Boyd K. Packer suggests that you sing an inspirational song of Zion, or just think on its words. Elder Bruce R. McConkie recommends that, after the opening

song, you might preach a sermon to yourself. In fact, he says the finest sermons he has ever preached have been preached to himself.

We should not invite the devil to give us a stage presentation. Usually with our hardly realizing, he slips into our thoughts. Our accountability begins with how we handle the evil thought immediately after it is presented. Like Jesus, we should positively and promptly terminate the temptation. We should not allow the devil to elaborate with all his insidious reasoning.

It is our privilege to store our memories with good and great thoughts and bring them out on the stage of our minds at will. When the Lord faced His three great temptations in the wilderness, He immediately rebutted the devil with appropriate scripture which He had stored in His memory.

“Look unto Me in Every Thought”

The Lord said, “Look unto me in every thought” (D&C 6:36). Looking unto the Lord in every thought is the only possible way we can be the manner of men and women we ought to be.

The Lord asked the question of His disciples, “What manner of men ought ye to be?” He then answered His own question by saying, “Even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27). To become as He is, we must have Him on our mind—constantly in our thoughts. Every time we partake of the sacrament, we commit to “always remember him” (Moroni 4:3, 5:2; D&C 20:77, 79).

If thoughts make us what we are, and we are to be like Christ, then we must think Christlike thoughts. Let me repeat that: If thoughts make us what we are, and we are to be like Christ, we must think Christlike thoughts.

Paul, en route to Damascus to persecute the Saints, saw a light from heaven and heard the voice of the Lord. Then Paul asked a simple eight-word question—and the persistent asking of the same question changed his life. “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts

9:6). The persistent asking of that same question can also change your life. There is no greater question that you can ask in this world. “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” I challenge you to make that the uppermost question in your life.

In his book *Youth and the Church*, Elder Harold B. Lee included a chapter entitled “Lord, What Wilt Thou Have Me Do?” He began the chapter by relating this experience:

Some time ago I heard a leader in a high Church position explain his method of endeavoring to arrive at just and equitable decisions in his council meetings. He explained that as problems would be presented, he would frequently ask himself, “As measured by the record of the Master’s teaching, just what would He do in this given situation, or just how would He answer this question or solve this problem?” [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1945, p. 49]

While he doesn’t mention who the man was, that man in due time, would become the President of the Church, President David O. McKay.

My friend Tom Anderson told the following story:

There was a little crippled boy who ran a small newsstand in a crowded railroad station. He must have been about twelve years old. Every day he would sell papers, candy, gum, and magazines to the thousands of commuters passing through the terminal.

One night two men were rushing through the crowded station to catch a train. One was fifteen or twenty yards in front of the other. It was Christmas Eve. Their train was scheduled to depart in a matter of minutes.

The first man turned a corner and in his haste to get home to a Christmas cocktail party plowed right into the little crippled boy. He knocked him off his stool, and candy, newspapers, and gum were scattered everywhere. Without so much as stopping, he

cursed the little fellow for being there and rushed on to catch the train that would take him to celebrate Christmas in the way he had chosen for himself.

It was only a matter of seconds before the second commuter arrived on the scene. He stopped, knelt, and gently picked up the boy. After making sure the child was unhurt, the man gathered up the scattered newspapers, sweets, and magazines. Then he took his wallet and gave the boy a five-dollar bill. "Son," he said, "I think this will take care of what was lost or soiled. Merry Christmas!"

Without waiting for a reply the commuter now picked up his briefcase and started to hurry away. As he did, the little crippled boy cupped his hands together and called out: "Mister, Mister!"

The man stopped as the boy asked, "Are you Jesus Christ?"

By the look on his face, it was obvious the commuter was embarrassed by the question. But he smiled and said, "No, son. I am not Jesus Christ, but I am trying hard to do what He would do if He were here."

And that, my friend, is what it means to be a Christian, even on Christmas Eve. It's a matter of impersonation. [American Opinion, December 1971, pp. 13–14]

What Would Jesus Do?

Some years ago Charles Sheldon wrote a book entitled *In His Steps*. It is perhaps one of the greatest best-sellers in American history. It tells the story of a small group of people within a Christian congregation who took a pledge. The pledge was that for an entire year they earnestly and honestly would not do anything without first asking the question, "What would Jesus do?" After asking themselves that question, they were to follow Jesus exactly as they knew how, no matter what the results. The book tells what happened and how their lives were revolutionized.

Just before he died, Charles Sheldon wrote a small sequel to his book entitled *In His Steps Today*. It tells of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Ward and their four children. Their two oldest children,

George and Alice, attended college while their two youngest, John and Mary, were in high school. Mr. Ward was an official in a railroad office, and Mrs. Ward was prominent in the social, church, and literary life of the city.

One morning as the family was eating breakfast, Mr. Ward told of coming across a book in the library which he and Mrs. Ward had read some twenty-five years earlier, just before their marriage. It was entitled *In His Steps, or What Would Jesus Do?*

He wondered if the plan were practical, if it really worked. He knew of a large number of people who had taken the pledge to try to act as Jesus who had had some interesting experiences. He knew the children were eager to try experiments in the chemical laboratory and in other fields and wondered if they would be willing to conduct an experiment in the world of conduct.

He asked them if just for that day, for example, they would be willing to do nothing without first asking, "What would Jesus do?" and then try to do the same.

There was embarrassing silence around the table. They were a Christian family, but the subject was unusual. Finally, the silence was broken by John, "the irrepensible," as the others called him: "If we take the pledge, what's the matter with you and mother taking it too? You were talking to us yesterday about the bad example the old people set to the young generation. How about you and mother, Dad?"

The father agreed. Mrs. Ward said she would join in the pledge with the understanding that each one would give it an honest and sincere trial.

Perhaps the members of their family did not know it, but this event was to make history for all of them. The pledge was to run until ten o'clock that night. Then they were to meet at that time to share their experiences of the day, holding back nothing.

I wish I had time to tell you all of their experiences. Let me quote the parents, tell

what happened to the younger ones, and consider the final question raised by Mr. Ward.

First, let's hear from Mr. Ward:

"My first experience came to me as I went into my office this morning, and . . . saw Crawford of the auditing department. He was very much put out yesterday when he accused me of backing into his car out in front of the office, and bending a fender. I told him he had parked his car at such an angle that I couldn't get out without hitting it. We both became angry. This morning I went in, asked his pardon, and offered to buy him a new fender. It did us both good. . . ."

"This afternoon out at the golf course, while I was putting my things back into my locker, two of the members of the club came in and took flasks out of their lockers, drank, and offered some to the rest of us. This has been going on for a long time against the rules of the club and the laws of the state, but no one has ever enforced them. It seemed to me that if Jesus saw a crime being committed, he would consider it his duty as a good citizen to prevent it. I went to the chairman of the House Committee and reported the breaking of the rules, which has raised a storm."

"Several of the members came to me this evening down at the literary club, and threatened to blackball at me the next election for directors if I did not withdraw my charges against the drinkers. More will come from this. But what would Jesus do? It has been an interesting day."

Now let's hear from Mrs. Ward:

"I really did not know what following Jesus might mean, but my story has to do with the action of our women's Board of Directors in renting a part of our building to certain parties who are allowing dancing of a questionable nature to go on, together with card games that are practically nothing but gambling."

"I have known of this for some time as all the women do, but did not want to be unpopular by objecting. At the directors' meeting today, however,

I expressed my opinion and objection. The club is in debt, and the amusement concessions bring in big rent. I am the only member of the board to file a protest. It will mean — "Mrs. Ward paused, and there was a moment of silence."

Finally, let's hear from the younger ones, John and Mary, with Mary leading out:

"We went to an entertainment this evening. A lot of the girls at the high school had been to see it, and they told John and me that it was grand. But I'd rather John told what happened."

John seemed to be unusually reluctant to relate their experiences. Finally he spoke in a subdued tone that was unlike his usual loud and assertive manner.

"Well, after it began," he said, "I thought it was one of those foolish things that was just for — well, just entertainment. Then I remembered what you said one day, Mother, about not wanting Mary and me to go to any entertainment that we wouldn't invite you or father to see. Well, it got pretty vulgar, and —"

Another silence was around the table. Mrs. Ward looked at the boy with a new expression, as if some very rare experience were being related — as indeed it was.

The boy went on slowly: "Just then Mary nudged me and whispered, 'Let's get up and go out!' Honest, I thought it would be a [strange] thing to do, but then when I asked 'What would Jesus do?' it seemed all right. So we got up, treading on a lot of feet in the row where we had been sitting."

"On our way out," broke in Mary, "I said to John, 'Let's do one more thing. Let's tell the manager why we are going out.' John said, 'All right, and let's tell him to give us our money back because we did not pay for that kind of entertainment.' You never will see a more surprised man than Mr. Rondus when we told him how we felt!"

"Surprised isn't the word," interrupted John. "He was flabbergasted! When I told him we thought he ought to refund our money, he didn't say a word,

but forked the money right over. Do you think we did what Jesus would do?"

Mrs. Ward had a tear in her eye. She reached over and stroked the boy's head. "A thing like that never happened in this town before. Well, we certainly have had some new experiences."

"Worthwhile, don't you think? But can we keep it up?" questioned Mr. Ward.

The question provoked a discussion around the Ward table that lasted into the next morning.

What do you think? [Charles M. Sheldon, In His Steps Today (Litchfield, Ill.: Sunshine Press, 1948), pp. 22–24, 29–31]

Walking in His Way

I began my remarks this morning by discussing how we are accountable for our thoughts and how we are what we think about. I have concluded by affirming that our thoughts should be on the Lord. We should think on Christ.

I testify to you that there is no greater, more thrilling, and more soul-ennobling challenge than to try to learn of Christ and walk in His steps. Our model, Jesus Christ, walked this earth as "the Exemplar." He is our Advocate

with the Father. He worked out the great atoning sacrifice so we could have a fullness of joy and be exalted in accordance with His grace and our repentance and righteousness. He did all things perfectly and commands that we be perfect even as He and His Father are perfect (see 3 Nephi 12:48).

"What would Jesus do?" or "What would He have me do?" are paramount personal questions of this life. Walking in His way is the greatest achievement of life. That man or woman is most truly successful whose life most closely parallels that of the Master.

I know that the Lord lives. I know that He loves us. I know that apart from Him no one can succeed, but as a partner with Him no one can fail.

I know that God can make a lot more out of our lives than we can.

That we may all have the moral courage from this moment forward to more fully strive each day to think on Christ, learn of Him, walk in His steps, and do what He would have us do is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.