

# *Honesty and Integrity*

REX E. LEE

Today is literally one of the highlights of my life. My soul is filled with joy and thanksgiving. From the time I was a little boy, the opening day of school has always been one of excitement and anticipation. It is for this reason that a high point of my years as president of BYU has been the opportunity for Janet and me to share some thoughts with you at the beginning of each fall semester.

This one, of course—for reasons Brother Hafen has explained—is also laden with an extra element of emotion. It is our seventh September devotional, and we realize that it will be our last. I have appreciated more than words can tell the expressions of support, loyalty, and love that I have received from you, and I want you to know how deeply Janet and I care for each of you and the great hopes that we have for your success and happiness not only during your time here at BYU, but also throughout this life and the next.

It is for this reason that I have pondered and prayed long over what message I want to leave with you on this very special day, my last devotional at the beginning of a new school year. There are so many hopes I have for each of you. I want you to be well educated, in the fullest sense of that word. I want you to be

learned in the wisdom of the world. I want your education to help you to be happier and give you a fuller understanding of the awesome significance of what it means that in these last days the Father and the Son have actually come here to this earth and personally chosen a prophet through whom the great prophecies of Daniel and Peter have come to pass and through whom a restitution of all things is possible.

We could discuss so many things as a consequence of these grand truths. I have chosen one topic, and I hope it will be helpful to you. The principle of living that I want to discuss with you today can carry anyone of several possible labels. A very popular one, and a good one, is *ethics*. Another is *honesty*. Frankly, the one that I slightly prefer is *integrity* because for me it includes not only the values implicit in the other two, but also reminds us that what we are striving for is a wholeness and completeness of all that is good. As President Kimball has taught us: “Integrity is one of the

---

*Rex E. Lee was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 5 September 1995.*

cornerstones of character. . . . [It] is a state or quality of being complete, undivided, or unbroken" (TSWK, p. 192).

Whatever we call it, the quality we are talking about is easier to illustrate than it is to label or to define, and both negative as well as affirmative illustrations are available. At the negative end is the classic statement of Leona Helmsley that "only little people pay taxes" or Ivan Boesky's equally insightful counsel to UCLA business students in 1986 that "greed is a good thing" or Leo Durocher's well-known observation that "nice guys finish last."

There is a *Peanuts* cartoon in which Charlie Brown first shot the arrow and then drew the bull's-eye and the rest of the supporting target around his arrow. When Lucy complained that that was not the way it was supposed to be done, Charlie Brown responded, "If you do it my way, you never miss!"

Let me give you an example at the opposite end of the spectrum. It involves a boyhood hero of mine, Ted Williams, one of the greatest baseball players of all time. A. Thomas Young, president and chief operating officer of Martin Marietta Corporation, who observed that "ethics will continue to be the issue of the 90s," reports Williams' experience as follows:

*More than 30 years ago, Ted Williams was closing out his career with the Boston Red Sox. He was suffering from a pinched nerve in his neck that season.*

*"The thing was so bad," he later explained, "that I could hardly turn my head to look at the pitcher. "*

*For the first time in his career he batted under .300, hitting just .254 with 10 home runs. He was the highest salaried player in sports, making \$125,000. The next year, the Red Sox sent him the same contract.*

*When he got the contract, Williams sent it back with a note saying that he would not sign it until they gave him the full pay cut allowed.*

*"I was always treated fairly by the Red Sox when it came to contracts," Williams said. "Now they were offering me a contract I didn't deserve. And I only wanted what I deserved."*

*Williams cut his own salary by 25 percent, raised his batting average by 62 points and closed out a brilliant career by hitting a home run in his final at bat. [A. Thomas Young, "Ethics in Business," *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 15 September 1992, pp. 725–26; emphasis in original]*

Wallace F. Smith, a Berkeley business school professor, defines ethics as "the inherent inner voice, the source of self-control in the absence of external pressure or compulsion" ("Readers Report," *Business Week*, 4 May 1992, p. 11).

This Ted Williams story is, I submit, the classic illustration. This great hero did what he did because he was exercising "self-control in the absence of external pressure or compulsion." My own favorite definition comes from Potter Stewart, an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court. He defines ethics as "knowing the difference between what you have a right to do and what is the right thing to do."

Justice Stewart is also one of my heroes and was one of history's finest justices and lawyers. I hope that throughout your lives you will remember and ponder his advice about the distinction between what you have a right to do and what is the right thing to do. You have a legal right, for example, to gossip, lie (unless you do it under oath), cut corners across BYU grass, burn flags, read pornography, be disrespectful to your parents, criticize and attack your Church leaders, apostatize from the Church, pay less than a full tithing, smoke cigarettes, be insensitive to your family members' needs, sit by silently doing nothing while your neighbor drowns—all the while writing a poem called "Ode to a Drowning Man"—or wear a red sweater in Cougar stadium the

afternoon of November 18, when the Cougars play the University of Utah. But the fact that you have a right to do these things does not make any of them the right thing to do, and ethics, as defined by Justice Stewart, consists of knowing the difference between the two.

One of the most important observations to make about ethics or integrity or whatever we call it is the danger of over-compartmentalization, that is, treating ethical issues as something separate and apart from other aspects of what we do. A law student reported, for example, that when she raised a question in one of her first-year classes whether a certain practice might be ethical, the professor responded, "You will take your ethics course next year." When I read this law professor's response, it reminded me of Elder Neal A. Maxwell's insightful observation that:

*Developing congruency and avoiding the compartmentalization of one's life is, of course, necessary for the wholeness and integrity we all crave, but which is so elusive at times. So many of us have a "public self" and a "private self." Jesus made it crystal clear that outer appearances and inner feelings must, ultimately, coincide. If the teachings of the gospel about honesty make for an honest tithe but wash against an attitudinal wall in terms of business practices, honesty is being applied differentially. We are saying that "honesty is the best policy—part of the time!" ["A More Excellent Way" (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1973), pp. 126–127]*

One of the best tests of whether we are or are not compartmentalizing our lives, I submit, is whether we would be willing to give our pet parrot to the town gossip.

I also like Elder Bruce R. McConkie's explanation that these principles of ethics, which are so universally accepted, and properly so, are grounded in more than common sense and respect for others. In his words:

*In teaching the gospel, it is far less effective to say "Be honest, for honesty is the best policy," and then to reason from a social standpoint why this is so, than to link honesty with the gospel out of which it grows by teaching: "Wo unto the liar, for he shall be thrust down to hell." (2 Nephi 9:34.) It is only when gospel ethics are tied to gospel doctrines that they rest on a sure and enduring foundation and gain full operation in the lives of the saints. [A New Witness for the Articles of Faith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985), p. 700]*

I believe that one of the most important indicators of how honest we are is the seriousness with which we keep agreements that we have made. One of the most sobering problems facing our society today, in my opinion, is the failure of so many people simply to do what they have agreed to do. It is becoming quite commonplace, for example, not only for professional athletes but also for others to insist on "renegotiating" their contracts because they conclude that they are now in a position to make a better deal than the one to which they earlier committed themselves.

A bit more subtle perhaps, but certainly just as important, are our obligations to organizations and institutions to which we belong, and with whom we have made certain commitments, either expressly or by virtue of our membership or affiliation.

One of the institutions—and the people who compose it—to whom we have an integrity obligation is the nation of which we are citizens. In the case of most of us, that country is the United States of America. For me, the most consistently dismaying lack of individual integrity in this respect is the failure of rather large numbers of American citizens to pay their income taxes. Equally dismaying are the reasons given by some of these people. The two most common are that the income tax is either unconstitutional or (in the case of some LDS Church members) inconsistent with gospel principles. Each of these positions is

absurd. Concerning constitutionality, the income tax is explicitly authorized by the Constitution itself. The Sixteenth Amendment states, in words that could not be more plain: “The Congress shall have power to lay and collect taxes on incomes.” I have spent a good part of my life arguing and litigating over what is and is not constitutional. But I have never understood how any rational human being can take the position that a part of the Constitution itself is unconstitutional. And the notion that the anti-income tax position is rooted in gospel principles is equally insupportable in light of President Harold B. Lee’s statement describing as “vicious and wicked” the practice of those “who are taking the law into their own hands by refusing to pay their income tax because they have some political disagreement with constituted authorities” (“Admonitions for the Priesthood of God,” *Ensign*, January 1973, pp. 105, 106).

Another opportunity to demonstrate our institutional integrity is provided by our membership in the BYU community, whose Honor Code is one of our distinguishing features. Some people are fond of pointing out, and very correctly so, that some aspects of our Honor Code are founded on principles of fundamental morality and integrity that would apply to any member of the Church and any ethical person regardless of affiliation or nonaffiliation with BYU—or for that matter with the Church. Examples are those principles dealing with observing the criminal laws of the land, academic honesty, and sexual morality. But it does not follow that we have a two-tiered Honor Code, the first tier consisting of those values that are to be taken seriously, and whose violation should be a matter for some kind of official university response, whereas those in the second tier, most notably our Dress and Grooming Standards, fall into a category of admonitions that we might call good ideas if you’re into that kind of thing, but since they’re

not required for a temple recommend, don’t sweat it.

What this two-tiered approach ignores, of course, is that there is another overarching principle at work, not applicable to members of the Church in general. It has to do with keeping the deals we have made, precisely the kind of thing that we have been talking about this morning. Members of the Church at large have not signed a formal commitment in the presence of their bishop to keep all aspects of the Honor Code, with solemn assurances that the applicants are serious about the commitments they have made and will honor them.

The fact that you and I have made such a commitment should be the end of the matter. Having made such a formal promise, we are bound by it just as Karl G. Maeser was bound by the hypothetical lines of his famous circle. That’s what we mean by honor, and that’s what we mean by integrity. A different standard does apply to those of us at BYU, a standard that has been determined very consciously by our board of trustees, and which each of us has solemnly agreed to follow. I hope that no one on this campus will ever adopt a two-tiered approach to the Honor Code, observing those provisions that in the individual’s view are important and disregarding the others. They are all important precisely because we have agreed to honor them.

In conclusion, let me tell you about one of our alumni who met the full measure of honesty. He is a retired gentleman, living on a modest pension, who sat in my office a few years ago and told me that in the 1930s he had attended BYU for one quarter. Due to some administrative error, he had never been billed for the \$32 that at that time, according to his recollection, was the amount BYU charged for a quarter’s tuition. He told me, “For over 50 years that unpaid tuition has weighed heavily on my mind, and I want to make it right. You tell me what I owe, and I will pay.” I told him that he owed us absolutely nothing. The statute

of limitations on that claim had run a half century ago. He patiently pointed out that he was not talking about a legal obligation but a moral one.

When I could see that nothing less than satisfaction of my estimate of the present value of that original \$32 obligation would calm his soul, I told him that I thought a reasonable present value for the unpaid tuition of years ago would be about \$500. He thought about my answer for a minute and then said, "Could I have a little time to pay it off?" We worked out a payment schedule, and that obligation has now been completely satisfied.

I refer back to Elder McConkie's observation that for a believing, practicing Latter-day Saint, we are honest and ethical not only because it is the best policy but also because it is solidly tied to the principles of restored

truth. Everything we do should be guided by restored truth, by our conviction that once again prophets walk upon the earth, and we have the benefit, both through modern scripture and through their teachings, of the will of our Heavenly Father. It's not just another Church. Joseph Smith really did see the Father and the Son, the priesthood is once again on the earth, and the Book of Mormon is exactly what it purports to be, a new witness for Christ received by revelation and translated under the direct inspiration of our Heavenly Father. We must first secure our knowledge of these truths, and they will then become the foundation for everything else we do. That honesty and integrity in all things and with respect to all persons and institutions may be one of the results of that conviction is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.