

“Thy Friends Do Stand by Thee”

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My dear young friends, it is a great privilege and honor to be able to address you in this CES fireside. I am grateful to be here in the Marriott Center on the campus of Brigham Young University and to speak to those of you gathered in locations throughout the entire world in many different circumstances and languages. Thank you for coming. You honor the Lord Jesus Christ by putting aside other matters in your lives to join together at this time. I am grateful to be here with my wife, Melanie, and a number of our family and dear friends.

I pray that my remarks will be guided by the Holy Ghost and that you will feel in your own hearts that what I have to say has relevancy to what you are facing and what you are experiencing at this time in your lives.

The Importance of Righteous Friendships

Many years ago, in March of 1839, the Prophet Joseph Smith, with several of his companions, had been wrongfully incarcerated for months at Liberty Jail. Many writers of Church history have said that this experience for the Prophet Joseph was certainly one of the most difficult and darkest periods of his entire life. His words “O God, where art thou?” (D&C 121:1)—as recorded in section 121 of the

Doctrine and Covenants—speak of a desperate loneliness in the bleakest of settings.

The Lord did not appear or send angels; He did not thrash the guards or swing wide the door of that damp, dirty cell. Put simply, He did not change the circumstances, but He spoke comfort and reassurance to Joseph like no other could: “My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment” (D&C 121:7). It was as if the Lord put His arm around Joseph when He said, “My son.” Those are precious and tender words. And then He put a timetable on Joseph’s hardship—“a small moment.” What a lesson for all of us to remember. Our hardships will be brief—in eternal terms—and the Lord will be right there.

Then the Lord said this: “Thy friends do stand by thee, and they shall hail thee again with warm hearts and friendly hands” (D&C 121:9).

Here was Joseph, locked in jail by the treachery of men, some of whom had once been his close associates. But the Lord made

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the point so clear—“thy friends do stand by thee.” How comforting that declaration was to the Prophet Joseph; how comforting to us. Think for a minute what it means to you to know you have someone standing right by you, someone you can trust to be your friend on good days and bad, someone who values you and supports you even when the two of you are apart.

Our most prized friend is Jesus Christ Himself. Is there any greater assurance than His “I will be on your right hand and on your left, . . . and mine angels round about you, to bear you up” (D&C 84:88)? So often those “angels round about” are our friends.

My message tonight centers on the importance in each of our lives of righteous friendships. In my youth, an inspired patriarch laid his hands on my head and by revelation opened to me an understanding of my potential—for who I really am—and gave a direction for my life, just like a patriarch has done for most of you. I was told that I would not lack for friends and associates, that their friendship would be a special blessing to me both temporally as well as spiritually. I was counseled to select for my closest friends those who were righteous and had a desire to keep the commandments of God.

That passage from my patriarchal blessing and the verse from section 121 have been like a comfort blanket to me throughout my life. At times, especially while living away from home, those words have given me a peace and strength—my friends were standing by, although separated by many miles. And at such times I learned one of life’s most important lessons, that no matter how long I was away, no matter how great the distance, whenever my friends and I met again, it was as if nothing had changed. We picked up our lives where we left off, and it was as if time had stood still.

Why do I emphasize that? Because in today’s world so many people willingly trade

those friendships for video characters and quick text messages. They spend their time identifying with television personalities who for them are only faces on a screen. They are choosing to “hang out” rather than commit to a deep and meaningful relationship that can be sealed in the temple for eternity. Think about it. True friendships are based on love of God and sharing that love with others. That was one of the messages in Liberty Jail.

From my earliest days growing up in the Cottonwood Stake in the Salt Lake Valley, friends have been a special blessing to me. The closest friends made in my youth remain my friends to this day. Some are here with us tonight. It has always been that way; we have always been there for each other. And I have been grateful to make new friends who have been a strength and blessing to me as well.

When I think of friendship, I think of the example of President Thomas S. Monson. Consider this teaching of our beloved prophet. He said:

Friends help to determine your future. You will tend to be like them and to be found where they choose to go. Remember, the path we follow in this life leads to the path we follow in the next.

In a survey made in selected wards and stakes of the Church, we learned a most significant fact: Those persons whose friends married in the temple usually married in the temple, while those persons whose friends did not marry in the temple usually did not marry in the temple. This same fact pertained also to full-time missionary service. The influence of one’s friends appeared to be a highly dominant factor—even equal to parental urging, classroom instruction, or proximity to a temple.

The friends you choose will either help or hinder your success.¹

Those are sobering words.

Who wouldn’t choose President Monson as a friend? He gives away his trains at Christmastime, he gives the clothes off his back

and the shoes off his feet to people who don't have any, he gives countless hours to those so often forgotten in care centers or struggling for life in hospitals, and he shares his joy for life with all of us when he wiggles his ears. What's not to like? When a group of missionaries was asked to identify one of President Monson's greatest attributes, almost all chose his love for people. One even suggested he wished he could live next door to the prophet because he knew they would then become good friends.

I have found the Brethren's counsel on friendship to ring true with my own experience and be particularly applicable today. Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

Whether young or old, we need to be good friends, but also to pick our friends carefully. By choosing the Lord first, choosing one's friends becomes easier and much safer. Consider the contrasting friendships in the city of Enoch compared to peers in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah! The citizens of the city of Enoch chose Jesus and a way of life, then became everlasting friends. So much depends on whom and what we seek first.²

Mentoring Friendships

Some friends are wise and trusted mentors. They are a special kind of friend; they have gone before us, and they know the way. And they too "stand by" us. Who were Joseph Smith's mentors? Moroni comes immediately to mind; ancient disciples; John the Baptist; Peter, James, and John; Paul; Joseph's mother and father; his brother Alvin—the list is impressive. It is fair to say he was found in good company.

Consider for a minute those who have mentored each of you. Do you desire to mentor others as opportunities come in the future? Are you preparing to share your testimony of the gospel and your grasp of how to be successful in our everyday pursuits?

History and the scriptures are full of examples of men and women who have served as

righteous mentors. Perhaps the most obvious is our Lord Jesus Christ as He established His Church in the meridian of time. At the beginning of His ministry, He selected 12 seemingly ordinary men who left their normal occupations and spent three years in His company. They traveled with Him, listened to His sermons, ate meals with Him, witnessed the miracles He performed, and were the recipients of many private moments of instruction. What an unparalleled blessing it was for them to be personally tutored by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Each of them was personally changed by that privileged association.

Another example in a somewhat unusual reversal of roles is Joseph Smith, who became a spiritual mentor to his older brother Hyrum. Hyrum, humble and teachable, stood by Joseph's side. He was there in Liberty Jail, and he fell first at Carthage. Hyrum chose as his mentor the prophet of God. He chose well.

In our day, and in my service as a General Authority, members of the Quorum of the Twelve take a profound interest in our lives, generously conveying to us their experiences and effectively teaching us how to fulfill our sacred summons to this ministry. I recall a comment made by Brigham Young when he said of the Prophet Joseph: "I feel like shouting hallelujah, all the time, when I think that I ever knew Joseph Smith, the Prophet."³ I have felt that way about a number of the leaders of our day.

In each case, a more experienced, trusted individual serves as an effective guide and adviser to a less-experienced person, helping to shape that person's understanding and teaching principles that will make him or her more effective, stronger, wiser, and more valuable as a servant of God.

Pause for a minute now and think: Who has mentored you? What have you learned from them that is life changing? How have they watched over you? How will you take their example and be a mentor yourself to younger

brothers and sisters, friends, and colleagues—those who may need and desire such a relationship?

An Example of a Mentoring Friendship

Let me give you an example from my own life. I have been blessed to have such dear friend-mentor relationships in my life with Elder Jon M. Huntsman—Area Seventy, philanthropist, benefactor, founder of the Huntsman group of companies, and my friend.

I first met Jon Huntsman in 1975, when I was 24 years old. I was an elders quorum president for a University of Utah married-student ward, and Jon Huntsman was my high council adviser. We became friends, and in my senior year, as I was preparing to conclude my education at the university, Brother Huntsman recruited me as a sales representative in his plastics company.

One of my very first assigned accounts was Avon, the cosmetic giant headquartered in New York City. To get me started with that important client, Brother Huntsman personally accompanied me to New York City for my initial introduction. Excited to be entering into a new career and anxious to make a good impression, I wore my best brown college suit with a brown tie and brown loafers. When we met at the airport, I noticed that Mr. Huntsman gave me a peculiar look. But he didn't say anything!

When we arrived in New York City, he told me there was a stop we needed to make before calling upon Avon. We went directly to a famous men's clothing store known as Brooks Brothers on swanky Madison Avenue. On the way, I recall him saying to me, "Now, Ron, if you are going to be a salesman in my company, and if you are going to represent me to Avon, you are going to learn how to dress, how to act, and how to serve in this new role." And then he added, "You don't wear brown suits in a business environment in New York City!" Not representing Jon Huntsman at least!

Jon knew the people at Brooks Brothers, and he watched as they fitted me with a beautiful, dark gray, pin-striped suit—the nicest I had ever seen and certainly the nicest I had ever owned. After it was taken away to be tailored for a perfect fit, we picked out a shirt, some ties, a belt, and all the accessories. Next we went to the shoe department, where Jon introduced me to my very first pair of black wingtip dress shoes.

I guess Brother Huntsman's account at Brooks Brothers gave him special privileges because after we had had lunch, we returned to the store, where my new business wardrobe was ready, courtesy of Jon M. Huntsman.

I remember my gratitude to Jon for sparing me the needless embarrassment of showing up in my college clothes. As I stuffed—and that's exactly what I did—my brown outfit into a bag, I realized he had made sure I was properly dressed! Then it was off to Avon, where he introduced me as their new account representative from his company. Jon was teaching me much more than the importance of looking the part. He was introducing me into a whole new way of thinking, of doing things, of representing myself to others. He was mentoring me. This was the first of many such valuable lessons I learned from him.

Years later, while serving as an executive in Brother Huntsman's company, I was very involved in my duties, which took me around the globe. Returning from one of these business trips, Brother Huntsman, a stake president at this time, asked me what I was doing in the Church. I told him I was happily teaching a gospel doctrine class in Sunday School. He asked me what kinds of experiences I had had in Church leadership. I told him I had enjoyed serving in several presidencies, but most of my Church service, very happily, had been in teaching.

After I explained this to Brother Huntsman, he told me of a similar time in his life when he had been called to serve in a student stake, first

as a high councilor and later as a bishop. He found it ideal for his busy schedule. In fact, as I mentioned earlier in this message, that was where I first met Jon Huntsman.

He said he knew a brother at the University of Utah who was serving as the stake president of one of the university married stakes who could fill Church-service positions with brethren from across the Salt Lake Valley. Brother Huntsman asked if he might phone this stake president and let him know of my name. I agreed and really did not think of it again, knowing how busy he was.

Sometime later I received a call from Robert Fotheringham, the president of what was then the University of Utah First Stake. He asked if he and his counselors might come to our home and visit with Sister Rasband and me. Not many days later all three of the stake presidency were sitting on the couch in our living room, inquiring about our situation and feeling our testimonies. After a searching interview with each of us, the three men looked at each other knowingly, and the stake president then extended a call to me to serve as a member of the University of Utah First Stake high council. They said they had already talked to my resident stake president and that he felt fine about the call—if they should want to move forward.

I accepted that call and began my service in the University of Utah First Stake. As a part of my assignment, Sister Rasband and our young family enjoyed a wonderful opportunity to develop choice Christ-centered relationships with the young married students. After serving for a period of time on the high council, I was called as the bishop of the 10th Ward in that stake.

I later found out that Brother Huntsman did call President Fotheringham and simply suggested that he knew someone who might do well in a university campus setting. Hence, my dear friend and mentor Jon Huntsman, merely by mentioning my name for a possible

interview, provided another kind of experience for me in Church service.

I think of the wonderful young people I met in that university ward setting and the opportunity I had to assist several of them in finding employment themselves, one who is here with us tonight. Most importantly, I had the privilege of bearing witness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and establishing righteous friendships in a way similar to what Brother Huntsman did for me.

Later, when Sister Rasband and I were called to preside over the New York New York North Mission, we enjoyed the privilege of working with many faithful missionaries. We were able to help them not only be more effective in their current callings as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, but our connection has continued to this day as we assist them with letters of recommendation, counsel, encouragement, and all of our love. I do have to admit I have not bought anyone a new suit and wingtips . . . yet!

As these few examples show, I am a very strong believer in friend-mentor relationships.

Accept Counsel from Mentors

Elder Neal A. Maxwell, who served as a mentor for so many—including me—said:

Each of us, from time to time, is mentored and has chances to mentor. In my experience, truthful and caring one-liners that occur within such nurturing relationships have a long shelf life! You can probably recount three or four examples of how people have said something—probably a sentence or clause—and you remember it still. It moves and touches you still.⁴

I think of the young mother who always said to her children when times were tough, “We can do this.” They believed her. Or the missionary who told his new companion fresh from the MTC, “Expect a miracle every day.” He did, and that faith set the course of the new elder’s mission. Or President Monson

concluding his message and acknowledging a young man eight rows back in a sea of 5,000 youth assembled at an East Coast Scout Jamboree. That young man was my 12-year-old son, whom he had met on several occasions. Believe me, my son will never forget that President Monson called him by name and said, “Chris Rasband, come up here and say hello.” And what greater example than the Savior, who looked at a humble group of fishermen and said these simple words: “Follow me” (Matthew 4:19).

In this day and time, described by the Apostle Paul as a “perilous” time (2 Timothy 3:1), recorded by the Prophet Joseph Smith as a “day of . . . calamity” (D&C 136:35), described by Nephi in the Book of Mormon as a day when the adversary would “rage in the hearts of the children of men” (2 Nephi 28:20), I suggest to all of you, my dear young friends, the importance of developing sound and wonderful friendships with wise and trusted mentors.

Sometimes we are reluctant to receive counsel; we push back from someone offering us suggestions. We get the notion that we already know what we need to know; pride gets in the way. When that occurs we forfeit the wisdom, information, or experience which would otherwise bless our lives. Imagine the difference it might have made in my relationship with Brother Huntsman, or in my career, if I had been too proud to accept his generous offer of a new suit.

This is often the case in our youthful relationships with our parents, whom we sometimes think of as old-fashioned, uninformed, or simply “not cool!” So at times it is easy to dismiss their teachings as irrelevant in our lives. Many of us have heard the statement “When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.” Although we do not know who

penned this quote, its message is instructive for each of us. Moms and dads and grandmas and grandpas have a lot to offer. Do not discount what their experiences have taught them and the love they have for you. They are perhaps your ultimate earthly mentors. Sister Rasband and I now treasure the opportunity we have to be grandparents. What a thrill it is when our grandchildren ask us a question or seek some direction on some important matter in their lives.

Others who may have valuable input, but who we on occasion tend to ignore, are our in-laws. Their experiences are often as pertinent as those of our parents. We would do well to respect their opinions and give consideration to their input. Many of you do not have in-laws yet, but I’m confident you will someday! Take time to learn from them and solicit their opinions. Doing so will certainly add to your own wisdom.

For each one of you within the sound of my voice and those who will read this message later, there are many other potential mentors available to you. Let me suggest a few: bishops, stake presidents, mission presidents, quorum leaders, professors, seminary and institute teachers, trusted friends and colleagues, Relief Society sisters, and so many others. I have benefitted from so many of their examples and teachings, and so have you! Take full advantage of their ideas, and let their influence inspire and bless your lives too.

Be Good Friends

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of being good friends. Becoming such friends is not always easy. Ralph Waldo Emerson gave great counsel when he observed, “The only way to have a friend is to be one.”⁵ And the old cliché “Birds of a feather flock together” is still true. To have friends who live high standards, who stand for virtue and goodness, who are faithful and true to their covenants, you must be such a person to them.

In this world where there is so much sleaze, permissiveness, and immorality, having good friends will go a long way in ensuring our ability to withstand the evils of this, our day. For those who are still single, having good friends will put you in a position to attract the kind of eternal companion you will hope to find. Such was the case with Sister Rasband. We were first great friends. An invitation for marriage came later.

Jesus Christ Is Our Exemplar in Friendship

As we think of friendship, think of what the Prophet Joseph Smith saw in a vision and recorded of the Apostles preaching in England:

I saw the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb, who are now upon the earth, who hold the keys of this last ministry, in foreign lands, standing together in a circle, much fatigued, with their clothes tattered and feet swollen, with their eyes cast downward, and Jesus standing in their midst, and they did not behold Him. The Savior looked upon them and wept.⁶

Though they did not see Him, Jesus stood by them. Aware of their plight and sympathetic to their hardship, it was His loving support that sustained them in their mission and brought hundreds and thousands of new converts into the Church. It was the Savior who said to His disciples, “Ye are my friends” (D&C 84:63). It was the Savior who taught, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). It was the Savior who beckoned, “Come unto me” (Matthew 11:28). In friendship, as in every other principle of the gospel, Jesus Christ is our Exemplar.

Now my dear young, new friends gathered throughout the world, I bear my testimony to you at this time that this is the gospel of Jesus Christ. I bear witness that a very important element of your experience in the gospel is the friends you make and the mentors you follow, just as I was promised in my patriarchal blessing at 19 years of age.

I close where I began, with the verse of scripture spoken by God to the Prophet Joseph when he was in Liberty Jail, and suggest this could equally be spoken to you and to me in whatever condition we find ourselves at this time: “Thy friends do stand by thee, and they shall hail thee again with warm hearts and friendly hands” (D&C 121:9).

I reaffirm this promise given by the Lord in the early days of the Restoration of this Church. I pray that each of us will have the privilege of enjoying righteous friendships and mentoring relationships as we grow together in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

These thoughts and words I leave with you tonight in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, our Friend, amen.

Notes

1. Thomas S. Monson, in *CR*, April 1998, 63; or “In Harm’s Way,” *Ensign*, May 1998, 47.
2. Neal A. Maxwell, in *CR*, October 2000, 46; or “The Tugs and Pulls of the World,” *Ensign*, November 2000, 36; emphasis in original.
3. Brigham Young, *JD* 3:51 (6 October 1855).
4. Neal A. Maxwell, “Jesus, the Perfect Mentor,” *Ensign*, February 2001, 8.
5. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Friendship,” *Essays: First Series* (1841).
6. Joseph Smith, *HC* 2:381.