

What Is It That We Honor?

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As always at this time of year, I look forward to welcoming each of you to campus and the start of what we anticipate will be a wonderful, productive, and enriching new academic year. We are grateful to have each of you: those who are here for the first time, those who are continuing, and those who are returning after missions or other endeavors elsewhere. It is good to be in your company.

If I were a student, which I try to be, I would now be entering my senior year at BYU. I have been generally delighted by my experiences and hope that this is your lot as well. BYU is wonderful. It is also a big, complicated, and sometimes intimidating place. I am grateful to so many who go out of their way to be friendly and extend greetings as we pass each other on the campus. I hope that all of you will make special efforts to reach out and befriend your new associates. Some of you come with already made friends and previous contacts. While these relationships will and should continue, I hope and ask that all of you will consciously seek to broaden your circles, meet new friends, and always be friendly and courteous to everyone you encounter. This is part of what BYU is and should be.

We must never forget that BYU is not just another “good” university. It was established

by the Lord’s servants and continues to be blessed with the direction and support of prophets, seers, and revelators. While we may not understand all of the details, we do know that Brigham Young University occupies a key place in the Lord’s plans for the completion of His work in these last days.

Because there is so much that is good and praiseworthy here at BYU, and because almost all of you are so good and praiseworthy, it is a great temptation to spend our limited time together in complimentary expressions. These are in order, and I do express my deep and profound appreciation and admiration for so much and to so many of you, especially those who make the BYU experience possible: the faithful tithing payers of the Church, your loyal families and supporting friends, our generous supporters and donors, and others who contribute in so many ways.

As I do so, however, I also feel impressed to share with you some reflections of admonition that accompany my appreciation and admiration. I listen to and read with deep interest

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the comments that many in our community make and those that are shared by people who mainly love and care about BYU and you. You would not be surprised that in my responsibilities I receive significant input. My e-mail and letter boxes are often quite full, and in my meetings and question-and-answer sessions with students, faculty, staff, and administrative colleagues, as well as with alumni, community groups, university supporters, and Church leaders, I am provided with volumes of feedback, suggestions, and occasional criticisms. Almost all are constructive and well-meaning, although there is occasional evidence of a little carping, lack of charity, or limited understanding of issues being addressed.

While not a universal theme, it continues to impress me that so much of the dialogue at BYU and about BYU seems to focus on our Honor Code in one way or another. It is typically not so much that individuals are overtly opposed to the Honor Code as it is they are concerned about the perceived understandings or applications that other individuals have about what the Honor Code really means and what it really is or should be.

As I have tried to think seriously and ponder all of the dimensions of this issue, I have repeatedly been reminded of the words of the Savior. I hope you will consider them carefully and see if there are applications to the Honor Code that you can identify and use to deepen your own understanding and commitment.

As we know, Jesus was rich in His praise and encouragement when conditions allowed Him to do so, but He was also crisp and clear in His corrections and criticisms when such was necessary. I hope we can avoid being selective in our attention to His correctives, just as I hope we can find joy in considering that many of His compliments are directed to us when we live as we should.

Think of that terrible night, just prior to the Atonement, when Jesus met with His apostles to keep the Passover with them. As He opened

the curtain for them about the events to occur shortly, He announced that one of their quorum would betray Him. Listen to Matthew's account of their reaction to this distressing announcement: "And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I?" (Matthew 26:22).

Note that Peter didn't say, "Is it Andrew?" Nor did James say, "Is it John?" I don't know what any of them really thought of or about Judas Iscariot. Their reflections and concerns were upon themselves and their own weaknesses and limitations. Although we know that they were perceptive and undoubtedly aware of the shortcomings of others, at that sacred moment they were most anxious that their own lives were in order and, however their actions, thoughts, weaknesses, or failings might be afflicting themselves and others, they did not want to be involved in any way in the betrayal of the Lord. In my judgment, this is an attitude and approach worthy of our emulation and application generally and in particular with respect to the Honor Code.

With the question "Lord, is it I?" at the forefront of our minds and hearts, think about Jesus' description and condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees. I don't believe we have a single scribe or Pharisee among us, but I do fear that, on occasion, some of their characteristics and attitudes find their way into our circle. The entire 23rd chapter of Matthew is worthy of our careful study and consideration. Rarely has a recorded rebuke by the Master been so lengthy, specific, and scathing. In a similar vein, in modern revelation, the Savior drew searing attention to those who neglected or omitted "the weightier matters of the law" (Matthew 23:23; see also D&C 117:8).

Like those mentioned in the meridian of time and in the early days of the Restoration, we in our day continue to be tempted to be selective in our discipleship and choosy about which conventions and commandments we will observe and which we might justify in ignoring.

Jesus Himself suggested a hierarchy of importance in the things we have been asked to do and to observe. Most would agree that murder is more vile than is cheating on our taxes and that physical assault is more vexing than a lack of common courtesy. Likewise, violation of sacred temple covenants should trouble us more than a missed day of scripture study, and disappointing a friend or loved one by an act of dishonesty is more distressing than is a hurt engendered only by thoughtless forgetfulness.

Nevertheless, we must be clear that an emphasis on the seemingly “weightier matters” does not excuse us “to leave the other undone” (Matthew 23:23). Because we consider the mandate never to cheat on examinations, plagiarize in writing our papers, steal from our associates or the university, or commit any immoral act absolute, it does not excuse us from seemingly lesser requirements having to do with proper parking on campus or requirements with respect to dress and grooming. Yes, some things are more important than others. Yes, we can agree to disagree individually on the place in the hierarchy of importance a particular standard explicated in the Honor Code should have.

What we must agree on—and have agreed on as we signed the appropriate document of acceptance when we came to BYU—is that we will abide by the Honor Code. Is our Honor Code all-inclusive? It is a remarkably broad and detailed description of things deemed to be important institutionally to us. We need to remember that, like all important documents, it has constituents that are implicit as well as those obviously explicit. Remember the words of King Benjamin as he completed his remarkable benedictory sermon:

And finally, I cannot tell you all the things whereby ye may commit sin; for there are divers ways and means, even so many that I cannot number them.

But this much I can tell you, that if ye do not watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God, and continue in the faith of what ye have heard concerning the coming of our Lord, even unto the end of your lives, ye must perish. And now, O man [BYU students, faculty, staff, administrators, friends, families, supporters, and visitors], remember, and perish not. [Mosiah 4:29–30]

Some have suggested that because Jesus was so concerned about the importance of what goes on inside of us, we should be less concerned about external appearances or observances. Make no mistake, who we are in private and what we value most at our core are of supreme importance and are “weightier matters.” However, it is also true that what we project externally should reflect who we really are.

In a recent tribute to President James E. Faust, his daughter, Janna F. Coombs, remarked that even when performing priesthood ordinances for members of his family in the privacy of their own home, he would be dressed appropriately as a representative of the priesthood he was exercising. President Faust is not stuffy; he is not pretentious. He makes no efforts to impress anyone unduly. He is meek, humble, and self-effacing. But he is fearless in his defense of the Lord and all things sacred. He is scrupulous in his devotion and honor to those things serious and fundamental. In other words, he lives the Honor Code with exactness.

I would suggest that you men who hold the priesthood have the same responsibility to honor the priesthood. President Faust did not become honest, honorable, and respectful when he was called to the First Presidency. It did not begin when he was ordained as an apostle or called as a bishop, stake president, or General Authority. He did not suddenly become a man of honor when he was called as a missionary or when he graduated from

law school. He made all of these decisions and commitments when about your age and before—and all that has transpired since has been made possible because he has always taken the matter of honor seriously.

Likewise, you sisters who know that you “are daughters of our Heavenly Father” who loves you (Young Women theme) have a similar obligation and opportunity to demonstrate what you really understand and value by how you follow the Honor Code—to which you have attached your own name and personal honor.

All of us are beset with ideas, temptations, and distractions that have the potential to lead us to places we do not wish to go and to consequences we would not choose. The Word of Wisdom was given “in consequence of evils and designs which do and will exist in the hearts of conspiring men [and women] in the last days [our days]” (D&C 89:4). It is my judgment that this is also a major reason for the development of the Honor Code at Brigham Young University.

Similarly, the BYU Honor Code—not a canonized revelation but “adapted to the capacity of the weak and the weakest of all [BYU students]—is associated with promised blessings (D&C 89:3).

Included in the many blessings that a BYU education and experience may provide is the opportunity to understand and reflect carefully on what things in life are most important to us. This occurs in an environment where sacred things are held sacred and where we are committed to helping each other understand and apply eternal truths as we strive and grow in the quest for academic and scholarly excellence.

In addition, like the Word of Wisdom, the Honor Code is not primarily a law of health or blind conformity. It is a principle of obedience. It is an outward manifestation of our inner appreciation for and understanding of the privilege of being at BYU.

As we do our best to live the Honor Code in this light, we are assisted by focusing on “the weightier matters” ourselves and by not distracting others by our carelessness or neglect of those things “not to [be left] undone” (Matthew 23:23).

I like the attitude and approach of the Apostle Paul. In a discourse that has many applications to our current Honor Code dialogue, Paul makes some observations that I suggest for your consideration. The specifics of his attention had to do with the eating of meat and offerings made to idols. Our doctrine has not changed, although many other dimensions of life have. Listen to Paul’s words and try to grasp the Honor Code implications of things that you might have considered to be of little importance or consequence:

But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse.

But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. . . .

Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend. [1 Corinthians 8:8–9, 13]

If you do not care enough to shave for yourselves, do it for your associates and friends. If you do not respect yourselves enough to dress modestly and appropriately, do it for others.

If you are ambivalent about the importance of the little things as they apply to you, do them anyway out of respect for those who have sacrificed and do sacrifice in order that you might have the remarkable experience of a BYU education. Is the Honor Code a small thing? I do not accord it as such. Is compliance with the Honor Code to which you have attached your signature and pledged your personal honor really that significant? I judge it to be.

Now, I have been direct and, hopefully, clear as I have expressed my concerns and observations. I hope that I have not given offense to anyone, but I also hope that I have added clarity to some matters that may have been blurry in the thinking of some. I feel somewhat as Jacob may have felt as he attempted to be helpful to the people of Nephi. Said he:

O, my beloved brethren, give ear to my words. Remember the greatness of the Holy One of Israel. Do not say that I have spoken hard things against you; for if ye do, ye will revile against the truth. . . . I know that the words of truth are hard against all uncleanness; but the righteous fear them not, for they love the truth and are not shaken. [2 Nephi 9:40]

I am convinced that what I have said is true and consistent with the statements and teachings of the Savior and the prophets. Some years ago, in a BYU devotional, President Gordon B. Hinckley said the following:

Every one of us who is here has accepted a sacred and compelling trust. With that trust, there must be accountability. That trust involves standards of behavior as well as standards of academic excellence. For each of us it carries with it a larger interest than our own interest. It carries with it the interest of the university, and the interest of the Church, which must be the interest of each and all of us.

Some few students resent the fact that the board has imposed a code of honor and a code of dress and behavior to which all are expected to subscribe. . . .

I think I can hear a student, perhaps a number of them, saying to a bishop, "Why do we have to sign these codes? Don't they trust us?"

I am reminded of what I heard from a man—a great, strong, and wise man—who served in the presidency of this Church years ago. His daughter was going out on a date, and her father said to her, "Be careful. Be careful of how you act and what you say."

She replied, "Daddy, don't you trust me?"

He responded, "I don't entirely trust myself. One never gets too old nor too high in the Church that the adversary gives up on him."

*And so, my friends, we ask you to subscribe to these codes and to have the endorsement of your respective bishops and stake presidents in doing so. It is not that we do not trust you. But we feel that you need reminding of the elements of your contract with those responsible for this institution and that you may be the stronger in observing that trust because of the commitment you have made. With every trust there must be accountability, and this is a reminder of that accountability. [Gordon B. Hinckley, "Trust and Accountability" (13 October 1992), *BYU 1992–93 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* (Provo: BYU, 1993), 24]*

Might we truly recognize what it is and who it is that we really honor. Might we understand the trust that has been bestowed upon us and the accountability that is ours is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

