

A Righteous Standard

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It is such an honor for me to be with you today—you who have come to this campus seeking a better life, a life of self-improvement. I'm sure there are many of you who have come with much sacrifice, which, in and of itself, is part of that better life.

Life's Most Important Decisions

At this time in your life, you enjoy a wide variety of activities—sometimes too many all at once. In addition to class attendance and study time, many of you have jobs. There are important social activities and service groups, athletic and physical fitness activities—the list goes on. At the same time you have church callings and family obligations. That weekly letter-writing time comes all too often, and there is no one to help you with the washing or ironing when you're in a bind. There are scripture study and journal writing. Most of you get very little sleep and are relatively new at juggling such varied and demanding schedules.

Yet it is interesting to me that some of life's most important decisions—Whom will I marry? What will be my life's work? What and where shall I study? and Where will I live?—are all made between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four.

That we have choices at all is a wonderful gift to us and a fundamental part of our Heavenly Father's plan enabling us to prove ourselves.

Abraham 3:25 states: "We will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them."

And in Helaman 14, verses 30 and 31, we read: "For behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free. He hath given unto you that ye might know good from evil."

Today I would like to share a story with you. Kieth Merrill, a filmmaker and Academy Award winner, tells this story about his youth.

When I was a young man I lived in a small community close to the mountains. I was a lifeguard and did lots of swimming. . . . We went swimming at a place called East Canyon, a beautiful man-made reservoir. The dam is in a narrow neck of the canyon between sheer rock walls.

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None of us had boats, so we couldn't water ski, but we would do what we called cliff diving. We'd climb up those rocks and dive into the reservoir. We'd always wear tennis shoes because the rocks were so sharp. . . .

After we'd been there several times and pretty well knew the rocks, cliffs, and the water depth, two or three of us hard-core East Canyon divers got into the inevitable teenage contest of raw courage. One guy climbed up to where we always dove from and yelled down, "Hey! I'll bet I dare dive higher than anybody here!"

"Ah, go on!"

So he climbed up to the top of the dam. The dam was about 50 feet off the water. Diving into the air he arched into the water, and like a bunch of sheep we crawled up the rocks, out onto the dam, and all of us dove off. . . .

Well, that didn't satisfy my friend, and so he said, "All right, I'll do one better!" He climbed 60 feet up the side of the cliff. And not wanting to be outdone, I climbed up by him. After all, everyone was looking at me. I had a great suntan, and I was sure everyone expected me to do what he was doing. He swallowed hard, buried his fear, and from trembling knees arched his back, and floated through 60 feet of air into the water.

I was grateful nobody was watching me as I prepared for my dive. When he'd cleared and seemed to be all right, I took courage, and made my dive. By now the other members of our diving contest had backed down, figuring it was a little high. But not my friend. He climbed on up to about 70 feet and once more prepared to dive. From below I could barely see him. Seventy feet is a very long way up on the rocks. I said to myself, "I hope he doesn't do it because if he does it, then obviously I've got to do it, and I really don't want to." About then I saw a pink body float through the air and splash into the water not far from me. He came up laughing, rubbing his shoulders and his eyes, and said, "Well, Merrill, are you going to do it?"

"Of course, I'm going to do it!" Everybody on the shore said, "Yeah, of course he's going to do it!"

And so I swam back to the shore and climbed up the rocks. I knew I only had the courage for one more jump. . . .

I scrambled up 80 feet to the very top of the cliff. As I turned around and looked down, I saw that the cliffs were back away from the water at that height. I had two challenges: to fall 80 feet and to get enough clearance to avoid hitting the rocks at the bottom. Everybody was egging me on in a negative way. "You're chicken, you're chicken!"

I stood there all alone, everybody waiting down below. The water was so far away it looked like crinkled tinfoil in the sun. I was just terrified, I was committed, but I had not even based my decision on what I wanted to do or what I felt was right. I had based it on about a half dozen guys whose names I don't even remember who were yelling, "Hey, chicken, are you going to do it?"

I realized that in order to make the jump I would have to run a distance to get enough momentum to carry me over the rocks below. So I backed up and ran as hard as I could toward the edge. I found the mark I had carefully laid at the edge of the rock and sprang out into space. I don't know how long it takes to fall 80 feet, but for me it took about a week. On the way down I remembered distinctly how my parents and teachers had taught me to be careful when making decisions because I could kill myself with a wrong one. I said to myself, "You have done it; you have killed yourself, because when you hit the water you'll be going so fast that it might as well be concrete." And when I hit the water, I was sure it was concrete. I don't know how far down you go when you jump from 80 feet, but I'll tell you, I was a grateful lad when my head finally popped above water. I took a quick inventory to make sure that the throbbing pain in my right thigh didn't designate the loss of anything important.

Well, why did I jump? Did I prove myself to the guys? You think they cared? You think they're sitting at home tonight saying, "Remember old Merrill, brave old Merrill, jumping off the. . ." They don't even remember! They don't care! But for me that moment was as important as my life. I made what could have easily been a fatal decision.

Through the grace of a very patient Heavenly Father I wasn't killed. I didn't land on the rocks; I missed by only a few feet. I didn't drown, and I didn't have a concussion or a number of other things that could easily have happened because of such a stupid decision.

*I was subjected to pressure that was hard to withstand, the pressure of friends expecting things of me that I didn't want to do because I knew better. But I yielded to the pressure. I was living in the world, and at that moment I was of the world because I was not in control of myself. I was not making decisions about my own life. [Kieth Merrill, "Deciding About Decisions," *New Era*, June 1976, pp. 12–13]*

I heard Kieth Merrill's story and immediately thought of the Savior's strength and courage in decision making when he was tempted after his forty-day fast in the wilderness. It seems as if the three types of temptations thrust upon the Savior occurred in the Kieth Merrill story, as well as in Luke 4:3–4: "If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread. . . . Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God."

Appetite—physical prowess: "Everyone's looking at me." "I had a great suntan." "If thou be the Son of God." From Luke 4:4–8:

And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world. . . .

And the devil said unto him, All this power will I give thee

If thou . . . wilt worship me. . . .

And Jesus answered . . . Get thee behind me, Satan, for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

Pride—adulation of peers: "Of course he's going to do it." From Luke 4:9–12:

And he brought him to Jerusalem, and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down from hence:

For it is written, He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee: . . .

And Jesus answering said, . . . Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

Power—you can do anything better than your friends: "I scrambled up eighty feet to the very top of the cliff."

Appetite, pride, power—common temptations for each of us.

We have to ask, "Why did Kieth Merrill do it?" He was terrified, and "had not even based [his] decision on what [he] wanted to do or felt was right."

Elder Dean Larsen said, "When we understand what is right and what is wrong, we are in a position to exercise our freedom in making choices. In so doing, we must stand accountable for our decisions, and we cannot escape the inevitable consequences of these choices" ("*Self-Accountability and Human Progress*," *Ensign*, May 1980, p. 76).

Our Values in Life

The world today presents a different set of values from that taught by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Eternal values never change while those of the world are transitory and are usually, or often, inconsistent with gospel standards.

The right and wrong of our decisions and actions should be consistently determined in light of the plan of salvation. There should be a standard of righteousness—this standard will enlighten and aid our decision process.

To understand that plan, take every opportunity to learn, to study, and to ponder the plan of salvation. Gain knowledge through personal and family scripture study, general conference talks, Sunday gospel worship and study, and religion classes.

Our values in life influence everything we do with our time, energy, resources, and the ways in which we interact with others. In short, they give direction to our life.

When Jesus suggested to the rich young ruler “Sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor” (Luke 18:22), it placed upon him an important decision of following either the Savior or the ways of the world. Because he was wealthy and valued money more than the treasures of heaven, he turned away “sorrowful.” The young ruler had all the attributes necessary for eternal life, but one misplaced value turned his decision in a wrong direction.

James Russell Lowell wrote a beautiful, heartwarming poem that has become a classic of the ages. It is entitled *The Vision of Sir Launfal*. In it he tells the story of a man’s search for the Holy Grail. The Holy Grail is supposedly the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper. Down through the span of time it has become lost, and Sir Launfal, in his lust and desire for recognition, seeks to retrieve it.

He sets out from his homeland in search of it. As he leaves the gates of the city, he passes a young man begging for alms, but the beggar is unnoticed by Sir Launfal in his zeal for his adventure.

Launfal spends a lifetime in his quest, only to return home, broken in spirit, penniless, and unsuccessful. As he enters the gates of the city, he again passes the beggar, who also has grown old with the passing of time.

But Launfal’s experience has mellowed and humbled him, and where before he had not noticed the beggar, he now stops to help the old man lift his quivering hands to his mouth for a drink of water. He then notices within his grasp the Holy Grail, the cup for which he has searched a lifetime, and recognizes it has been within his reach all along.

A Fork in the Road

President Kimball states, “A dozen times a day we come to a fork in the road and must

decide which way we will go. . . . It is important to get our ultimate objectives clearly in mind so that we do not become distracted at each fork in the road by the irrelevant questions: Which is the easier or more pleasant way? or, Which way are others going?” (TSWK p. 164).

Wasn’t Kieth Merrill dependent on what others were doing and saying? Was that part of the temptation of pride?

Right decisions are easiest to make when we make them well in advance, having in mind our standard of righteousness. This saves a lot of anguish at the fork in the road, when we’re tired and sorely tempted.

President Kimball said:

When I was young, I made up my mind unalterably that I would never taste tea, coffee, tobacco, or liquor. I found that this rigid determination saved me many times throughout my varied experiences. There were many occasions when I could have sipped or touched or sampled, but the unalterable determination firmly established gave me good reason and good strength to resist.

He went on:

The time to decide on a mission is long before it becomes a matter of choosing between a mission and an athletic scholarship. The time to decide on temple marriage is before one has become attached to a boyfriend or girl friend who does not share that objective. The time to decide on a policy of strict honesty is before the store clerk gives you too much change. The time to decide against using drugs is before a friend you like teases you for being afraid or pious. The time to decide that we will settle for nothing less than an opportunity to live eternally with our Father is now, so that every choice we make will be affected by our determination to let nothing interfere with attaining that ultimate goal.

Some people feel that decisions are really out of our hands, that we merely respond to circumstances without choice, like a rudderless ship that drifts at the mercy of the wind and waves. And I agree that

there can come a time when we no longer have control over our destinies, but I believe that this is only after the cumulation of our own past decisions has left us helpless. [TSWK, pp. 164–165]

Good advice! This brings us to ask: What do I value when I make decisions, especially the important ones, such as Whom should I marry? and Where shall I work?

The world asks, Should I marry at all? If so, do I really want to have children? Is my selection of an occupation one in which I want to succeed financially because of the love of money and all it represents or because of my desire to help others? There are a multitude of ways the world works on us to keep us from achieving our eternal purposes on earth.

Elder Royden G. Derrick contrasted our viewpoint with that of the world:

When everyone makes his own determination of what is right and what is wrong, we have so many different value systems that we could not possibly be one, as Jesus Christ commissioned us to be.

If you were playing in a basketball game, you would have to play by the rules or you would be taken out of the game. . . . How many people do we have throughout the world who attempt to make up their own rules, set their own value systems, and determine what is right and what is wrong regarding the true philosophy and gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ? . . .

*[Christ] sets the standards and makes the rules by which we live. He established the true value system; and if we will conform thereto and assist in building his kingdom in his way, we will receive rewards far beyond our fondest hopes and dreams. ["The True Value System," *Speeches of the Year, 1979* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1979), pp. 111, 114]*

Every day we are confronted with circumstances and choices that test our personal values and require decisions that will either strengthen or weaken these values. We must

evaluate influences on our values and goals. An aid to help us is found in Moroni 7:16–17:

For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for everything which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God.

But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil; for after this manner doth the devil work, for he persuadeth no man to do good, no, not one; neither do his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him.

The crucial test of life is not between fame and obscurity or between wealth and poverty. The greatest decisions of life are between good and evil.

"The Crown of Character"

As we think about eternal values and wise choices, let me share an experience of some who exemplified a righteous standard.

Our son-in-law, who is a bishop in a student ward and also a teacher of English on this campus, was assigned a six-week seminar last summer. After talking it over, he and our daughter, Susan, decided she would stay at home with their five children and see that they all had their summer lessons and also care for their yard in his absence.

One hot summer afternoon she brought the children to Salt Lake City to see us. While visiting with us she mentioned that everything that could go wrong had gone wrong. Then, having shared her problems and having touched base with home, she felt she could go on. About an hour after she left, the phone rang. Susan was calling from her home in Provo. We could barely hear her teary, squeaky voice on the other end, and we thought perhaps there had

been an accident. But she simply wanted us to know that the students in their ward, in spite of their busy schedules, had come over while she was in Salt Lake City and weeded their entire yard.

Commitment to righteousness is not just saying—it is doing!

From an unknown writer we read that

The greatest battle of life is fought within the silent chambers of the soul. A victory on the inside of a man's heart is worth a hundred conquests on the battlefields of life. To be master of yourself is the best guarantee that you will be in charge of the situation. Know thyself. The crown of character is self-control.

As we know and live the commandments, we will feel the whisperings of the Spirit helping us with the important decisions that must be made. From the Doctrine and Covenants we read:

Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not.

Blessed art thou for what thou hast done; for thou hast inquired of me, and behold, as often as thou hast inquired thou hast received instruction of my Spirit. If it had not been so, thou wouldst not

have come to the place where thou art at this time.
[D&C 6:36, 14]

And remember:

I did enlighten thy mind; . . .

. . . If you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things.

Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God? [D&C 6:15, 22–23]

All of us will swim in our own personal “East Canyon Lake” or perch precariously on the steep cliffs of our lives. We can know that we are on sure footing, however difficult the circumstances are, if we have a value system based on a foundation of gospel principles.

My challenge to each of us is to seek Christ, listen to him, and obey his commandments. Our values and standard of righteousness will become clear, and our ability to make decisions in harmony with that standard will be made possible. I bear witness to you, my brothers and sisters, that these things are true. I know that he lives and that he will be there to speak peace to our hearts. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.