

"THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST"

Brigham Young University-Idaho Religion Symposium

January 25, 2003, by Elder David A. Bednar

Good morning, brothers and sisters. I am delighted to be here with you. I pray for and invite the Holy Ghost to be with me and with you as together we discuss an important aspect of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last September I participated in an area training meeting in Twin Falls, Idaho. Elder Neal A. Maxwell presided at this training session, and on a Friday night and a Saturday morning he, the Idaho Area Presidency, and other general officers of the church instructed a group of approximately one hundred stake presidents. It was a meaningful and a memorable time of spiritual enrichment, learning, and edification.

During the course of his teaching and testifying, Elder Maxwell made a statement that impressed me deeply and has been the recent focus for much of my studying, reflecting, and pondering. He stated, "There would have been no Atonement except for the character of Christ." Since hearing this straightforward and penetrating statement, I have tried to learn more about and better understand the word "character." I have also pondered the relationship between Christ's character and the Atonement--and the implications of that relationship for each of us as disciples. This morning I hope to share with you just a few of the learnings that have come to my mind and to my heart as I have attempted to more fully appreciate this teaching by Elder Maxwell.

After returning home from the area training meeting in Twin Falls, the first question I attempted to answer was, "What is character?" The Oxford English Dictionary indicates that many of the uses of the word character relate to graphic symbols; printing, engraving,

and writing. The usages I found most relevant, however, relate to "the sum of the moral and mental qualities which distinguish an individual or a race; mental or moral constitution;" and this is the element of the definition I find most significant, "moral qualities strongly developed or strikingly displayed." Interestingly, when we look up the word "character" in the topical guide of our scriptures, we discover that it is cross-referenced to the topics of honesty, honor, and integrity.

Brigham Young emphasized the significance of the Savior's character as he taught and testified about the truthfulness of the Holy Bible:

“The Bible is true. It may not all have been translated aright, and many precious things may have been rejected in the compilation and translation of the Bible; but we understand, from the writings of one of the Apostles, that if all the sayings and doings of the Savior had been written, the world could not contain them. I will say that the world could not understand them. They do not understand what we have on record, nor the character of the Savior, as delineated in the Scriptures; and yet it is one of the simplest things in the world, and the Bible, when it is understood, is one of the simplest books in the world, for, as far as it is translated correctly, it is nothing but truth, and in truth there is no mystery save to the ignorant. The revelations of the Lord to his creatures are adapted to the lowest capacity, and they bring life and salvation to all who are willing to receive them.” (Discourses of Brigham Young, p. 124, emphasis added)

Brigham Young further taught that faith must be focused upon the character of Jesus. Let me repeat that: Faith must be focused upon the character of Jesus, upon His Atonement, and in the Father's plan of salvation:

“ I will take the liberty of saying to every man and woman who

wishes to obtain salvation through him (the Savior) that *looking* to him, only, is not enough: they must have faith in His name, character and atonement; and they must have faith in His father and in the plan of salvation devised and wrought out by the Father and the Son. What will this faith lead to? It will lead to obedience to the requirements of the Gospel; and the few words that I may deliver to my brethren and sisters and friends this afternoon will be with the direct view of leading them to God.” (Journal of Discourses, Vol.13, p. 56, Brigham Young, July 18, 1869, emphasis added)

In a message entitled, "O How Great the Plan of Our God" delivered to CES religious educators in February of 1995, Elder Maxwell specifically linked Christ's character to the infinite and eternal atoning sacrifice:

“Jesus' character necessarily underwrote His remarkable atonement. Without Jesus' sublime character there could have been no sublime atonement! His character is such that He suffered temptations of every kind, yet He gave temptations no heed. Someone has said only those who resist temptation really understand the power of temptation. Because Jesus resisted it perfectly, He understood temptation perfectly; hence, He can help us. The fact that He was dismissive of temptation and gave it no heed, reveals His marvelous character, which we are to emulate.”

Brothers and Sisters, perhaps the greatest indicator of character is the capacity to recognize and appropriately respond to other people who are experiencing the very challenge or adversity that is most immediately and forcefully pressing upon us. Let me say that one more time: Perhaps the greatest indicator of character is the capacity to recognize and appropriately respond to other people who are experiencing the very challenge or adversity that is most immediately and forcefully pressing upon us. Character is revealed, for example, in the power to discern the suffering of

other people when we ourselves are suffering; in the ability to detect the hunger of others when we are hungry; and in the power to reach out and extend compassion for the spiritual agony of others when we are in the midst of our own spiritual distress. Thus, character is demonstrated by looking and reaching outward when the natural and instinctive response is to be self-absorbed and turn inward. If such a capacity is indeed the ultimate criterion of moral character, then the Savior of the world is the perfect example of such a consistent and charitable character.

The New Testament is replete with strikingly displayed examples of the Savior's character. We are all well aware that following His baptism by John the Baptist and as a preparation for His public ministry, the Savior fasted for forty days. He also was tempted by the adversary to inappropriately use His supernal power to satisfy physical desires by commanding that stones be made bread, to gain recognition by casting Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, and to obtain wealth and power and prestige in exchange for falling down and worshiping the tempter. It is interesting to note that the overarching and fundamental challenge to the Savior in each of these three temptations is contained in the taunting statement, "*If* thou be the Son of God." Satan's strategy, in essence, was to dare the Son of God to improperly demonstrate His God-given powers, to thereby sacrifice meekness and modesty, and betray who He was. Thus, Satan attempted repeatedly to attack Jesus' understanding of who He was and of His relationship with His Father. Jesus was victorious in meeting and overcoming the seductive strategy of Satan.

Now I suspect the Savior may have been at least partially spent physically after forty days of fasting--and somewhat spiritually drained after His encounter with the adversary. With this background information in mind, please turn with me now to Matthew chapter 4, and together we will read verse 11. Matthew chapter 4, verse 11... the sound of all those scripture pages rustling

is the sweetest sound in the world, next only to the squawking of a little baby. Verse 11, and again, this is from the King James version:

"Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him."

This verse in the King James version of the New Testament clearly indicates that angels came and ministered to the Savior after the devil had departed. And undoubtedly, Jesus would have benefitted from and been blessed by such a heavenly ministration in a time of physical and spiritual need.

However, the Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew chapter 4 verse 11 provides a remarkable insight into the character of Christ. Please note the important differences in verse 11 between the King James version and the Joseph Smith Translation. Here's the Joseph Smith translation:

"Then the devil leaveth him, and now Jesus knew that John was cast into prison, and he sent angels, and, behold, they came and ministered unto him [John]."

Interestingly, the additions found in the Joseph Smith translation completely change our understanding of this event. Angels did not come and minister to the Savior; rather, the Savior, in His own state of spiritual, mental, and physical distress, sent angels to minister to John. Brothers and sisters, it is important for us to recognize that Jesus in the midst of His own challenge recognized and appropriately responded to John--who was experiencing a similar but lesser challenge than that of the Savior's. Thus, the character of Christ is manifested as He reached outward and ministered to one who was suffering--even as He himself was experiencing anguish and torment.

In the upper room on the night of the last supper, the very night during which He would experience the greatest suffering that ever took place in all of the worlds created by Him, Christ spoke about the Comforter and peace:

Please turn to John, chapter 14, and there we'll read verses 25 and 27. We'll begin in verse 25.

“These things have I spoken unto you, being yet present with you.

But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”

Once again the fundamental character of Christ is revealed magnificently in this tender incident. Recognizing that He himself was about to intensely and personally experience the absence of both comfort and peace, and in a moment when His heart was perhaps troubled and afraid, the Master reached outward and offered to others the very blessings that could and would have strengthened Him.

In the great intercessory prayer, offered immediately before Jesus went forth with His disciples over the brook Cedron to the Garden of Gethsemane, the Master prayed for His disciples and for all.

This is found in John chapter 17, and in chapter 17 we'll read verses 20, 21, 23, and 26, or portions thereof:

“...which shall believe on me through their word;

That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me...

...that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.

And I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them. ”

I find myself repeatedly asking the following questions as I ponder this and other events that took place so close to the Savior's suffering in the garden and His betrayal: How could He pray for the well-being and unity of others immediately before His own anguish? What enabled Him to seek comfort and peace for those whose need was so much less than His? As the fallen nature of the world He created pressed in upon Him, how could He focus so totally and so exclusively upon the conditions and the concerns of others? How was the Master able to reach outward when a lesser being would have turned inward? The statement I quoted earlier from Elder Maxwell provides the answer to each of these penetrating questions:

“Jesus' character necessarily underwrote His remarkable atonement. Without Jesus' sublime character there could have been no sublime atonement! His character is such that He suffered temptations of every kind, yet He gave temptations no heed.”

Jesus, who suffered the most, has the most compassion for all of us who suffer so much less. Indeed, the depth of suffering and compassion is intimately linked to the depth of love felt by the ministering One. Consider the scene as Jesus emerged from His awful suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane. Having just sweat great drops of blood from every pore as part of the infinite and eternal Atonement, the Redeemer encountered a multitude:

This is found in Luke, chapter 22, and we'll read verses 47 through

50:

“And while he yet spake, behold a multitude, and he that was called Judas, one of the twelve, went before them, and drew unto Jesus to kiss him.

But Jesus said unto him, Judas, betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?

When they which were about him saw what would follow, they said unto him, Lord, shall we smite with the sword?

And one of them smote the servant of the high priest, and cut off his right ear. ”

Now given the magnitude and intensity of Jesus' agony, having just from the garden, it perhaps would have been understandable if He had not noticed and attended to the guard's severed ear. But the Savior's character activated a compassion that was perfect. Note the Savior's response to the guard as described in verse 51: "And Jesus answered and said, Suffer ye thus far. And he touched his ear, and healed him. Consider, brothers and sisters, from whence he had just come.

As individually impressive as is each of the preceding events, I believe it is the consistency of the Lord's character across multiple episodes that is ultimately the most instructive and inspiring. In addition to the incidents we have thus far reviewed, recall how the Savior, while suffering such agony on the cross, instructed the Apostle John about caring for Jesus' mother, Mary. Consider how, as the Lord was taken to Calvary and the awful agony of the crucifixion was commenced, He pleaded with the Father in behalf of the soldiers to "...forgive them; for they know not what they do." Remember also that in the midst of excruciating spiritual and physical pain, the Savior offered hope and reassurance to one of

the thieves on the cross, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Throughout His mortal ministry, and especially during the events leading up to and including the atoning sacrifice, the Savior of the world turned outward--when the natural man or woman in any of us would have been self-centered and focused inward.

We can in mortality seek to be blessed with and develop essential elements of a Christlike character. Indeed, it is possible for us as mortals to strive in righteousness to receive the spiritual gifts associated with the capacity to reach outward and appropriately respond to other people who are experiencing the very challenge or the very adversity that is most immediately and forcefully pressing upon us. We cannot obtain such a capacity through sheer willpower or nor by personal determination. Rather, we are dependent upon and in need of "the merits, mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah." But line upon line, precept upon precept and in the process of time, we are enabled to reach outward when the natural tendency is for us to turn inward.

It is interesting to me that one of the central elements of the word *character* is created by the letters A, C, and T. As we already have seen in the examples of Christ's character from the New Testament, the nature and consistency of how one **acts** reveals in a powerful way his or her true **character**. In the case of Christ, he is described as one "...who went about doing good." Let me now briefly share with you two memorable experiences from my service as a stake president that highlight the relationship between our **actions** and a Christlike **character**.

Early one summer morning I was showering. My wife called to me in the middle of my shower and indicated that I was needed immediately on the telephone. (Obviously this was before the day of cell and cordless phones. I quickly put on my robe and hurried to the phone. I next heard the voice of a dear sister and friend

informing me of a tragic automobile accident that had just occurred in a very remote area involving three teenage young women from our stake. Our friend indicated one of the young women had already been pronounced dead at the scene of the accident and that the two other young women were badly injured and presently were being transported to the regional medical center in Fayetteville, Arkansas. She further reported that the identity of the deceased young woman was not yet known. There was urgency in her voice, but there was no panic or excessive alarm. She then asked if I could go to the hospital, meet the ambulance when it arrived, and assist in identifying the young women. I answered that I would leave immediately.

During the course of our telephone conversation and as I listened to both the information being conveyed and the voice of our friend, I gradually became aware of two important things. First, this friend's daughter was one of the young women involved in the accident. Our friend lived approximately 35 miles from the hospital and therefore she needed the assistance of someone who lived closer to the city. Second, I detected that this good woman simultaneously was using two telephone handsets--with one in each hand pressed to each of her ears. I became aware that as she was talking with me, she was also talking with a nurse at a small rural hospital who had initially attended to the three accident victims. Our friend was receiving updated information about the condition of the young women in the very moment she was informing me about the accident and requesting my help. I then heard one of the most remarkable things I have ever heard in my life.

I faintly heard the nurse telling this faithful mother and friend that the young woman pronounced dead at the scene of the accident had been positively identified as her daughter. I could not believe what I was hearing. I was listening to this good woman in the very moment that she learned of the death of her precious daughter.

Without hesitation, and with a calm and most deliberate voice, our friend next said, “President Bednar, we must get in contact with the two other mothers. We must let them know as much as we can about the condition of their daughters and that they will soon be in the hospital in Fayetteville.” There was no self-pity; there was no self-absorption; there was no turning inward. The Christlike character of this devoted woman was manifested in her immediate and almost instinctive turning outward to attend to the needs of these other suffering mothers. It was a moment and a lesson that I have never forgotten. In a moment of ultimate grief, this dear friend reached outward when I likely would have turned inward.

I then drove to the hospital with a concern in my heart for the well-being of the two other beautiful young women who had been involved in the accident. Little did I realize that the lessons I would learn about Christlike character--lessons taught by seemingly ordinary disciples--were just beginning.

I arrived at the hospital and proceeded to the emergency room. After properly establishing who I was and my relationship to the victims, I was invited into two different treatment areas to identify the injured young women. It was obvious that their respective wounds were serious and life threatening. And the lovely countenances and physical features of these young women had been badly marred. Within a relatively short period of time, the two remaining young women also died. All three of these virtuous, lovely, and engaging young women--who seemed to have so much of life in front of them--suddenly had gone home to their Eternal Father. My attention and the attention of the respective families now shifted to funeral arrangements and logistics.

A day or so later, in the midst of program planning and detail arranging for the three funerals, I received a phone call from the Relief Society president of my home ward. Her daughter had been one of the victims in the accident, and she and I had talked several

times about her desires for the funeral program. This faithful woman was a single mother rearing her only child--her teenage daughter. I was especially close to this woman and her daughter having served as both their bishop and stake president. After reviewing and finalizing several details for the funeral of her daughter, this good sister said to me, "President, I am sure it was difficult for you to see my daughter in the emergency room the other day. She was severely injured and disfigured. As you know, we will have a closed casket at the funeral. I have just returned from the funeral home, and they have helped my daughter to look so lovely again. I was just wondering... why don't we arrange a time when we can meet at the mortuary and you can have one last look at her before she is buried. Then your final memories of my daughter will not be the images you saw in the emergency room the other day." I listened and marveled at the compassion and thoughtfulness this sister had for me. Her only daughter had just been tragically killed, but she was concerned about the potentially troublesome memories I might have, given my experience in the emergency room. In this good woman I detected no self-pity and no turning inward. Sorrow, certainly. Sadness, absolutely. Nevertheless, she reached outward when many or perhaps most of us would have turned inward with sorrow and grief.

Let me now describe one final episode related to these three tragic deaths. On the day of her daughter's funeral, this Relief Society president from my home ward received a phone call from an irritated sister in our ward. The complaining sister had a cold and did not feel well, and she basically chewed out the Relief Society president for not being thoughtful or compassionate enough to arrange for meals to be delivered to her home. Just hours before the funeral of her only child, this remarkable Relief Society president prepared and delivered a meal to this complaining and murmuring sister.

We appropriately and rightly speak with reverence and awe of

young men who sacrificed their lives to rescue stranded handcart pioneers and of other mighty men and women who repeatedly gave their all to establish the Church in the early days of the Restoration. I speak with equal reverence and awe of these two women--women of faith and character and conversion--who taught me so much and instinctively reached outward when most of us would have turned inward. Oh, how I appreciate their quiet and powerful examples.

I noted earlier in my message that the letters A, C, and T form a central component in the word **character**. Also noteworthy is the similarity between the words **character** and **charity**--as both words contain the letters C, H, A, and R. Etymologically there is no relationship between these two words. Nevertheless, I believe there are several conceptual connections that are important for us to consider and to ponder.

Let me suggest that you and I must be praying and yearning and striving and working to cultivate a Christlike **character** if we hope to receive the spiritual gift of **charity**--the pure love of Christ. Charity is not a trait or characteristic we acquire exclusively through our own purposive persistence and determination. Indeed we must honor our covenants and live worthily and do all that we can do to qualify for the gift; but brothers and sisters, ultimately the gift of charity possesses us--we do not possess it. The Lord determines if and when we receive all spiritual gifts, but we must do all in our power to desire and yearn and invite and qualify for such gifts. As we increasingly **act** in a manner congruent with the **character** of Christ, then perhaps we are indicating to heaven in a most powerful manner our desire for the supernal spiritual gift of **charity**. And clearly we are being blessed with this marvelous gift as we increasingly reach outward when the natural man or the natural woman in us would typically turn inward.

I conclude now by returning to where I began--the statement by

Elder Maxwell in that special training session last September: “There would have been no Atonement except for the character of Christ.” It was the Prophet Joseph Smith who stated that, “it is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God.” The New Testament is a rich resource for learning about and increasing our appreciation for the character and life and example of the Savior. My prayer for each of us is that through our study of this sacred volume of scripture we will more fully come unto Him; more completely become like Him; and more fervently worship, reverence, and adore Him.

Brothers and sisters, as a witness, I declare my witness. I know and testify and witness that Jesus is the Christ, the Only Begotten Son of the Eternal Father. I know that He lives, and I testify that His character made possible for us the opportunities for both immortality and eternal life. May we reach outward when the natural tendency for us is to turn inward, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.