

# *The Dignity and Demeanor of Discipleship*

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**I**t has been several years since my husband and I were students here at BYU. We loved attending these Tuesday morning devotionals, and we are thrilled to be with you today. We love you and appreciate your desire to become more like the Savior.

While my husband and I served as mission leaders in North Carolina, we traveled by plane to a mission leadership conference in Atlanta, Georgia. If you have ever been on an airplane, you know that unless you are sitting in a first-class seat, you get caught in a jam at the front of the plane while waiting for others to move to their seats in the back. Our seats were *not* in first class, but we were stopped in the aisle next to a woman who was.

I couldn't help but overhear her loud and frantic cell phone conversation with someone she obviously trusted. It went something like this:

"You know how scared I am to fly. What if something happens to the plane?"

She listened to the person on the other side of the conversation and then responded, "I mean it! I am so nervous. Wait a minute. Jesus Christ is standing right next to me! I'm going to be okay!"

What she saw was my missionary badge, which displayed the name of Jesus Christ in bold letters.

She belted out, "I'm not kidding. It says 'Jesus Christ' right on her chest! Everything is going to be alright!"

She obviously knew that I was not Jesus Christ! But we both laughed for a second, and she relaxed. The line moved forward, and we went to our seats—in the back of the plane.

I was still chuckling as I settled into my seat. And then this question came into my mind: If I had not been wearing my missionary badge, would she have recognized me as a disciple of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ? I pondered that question the entire flight. And I continue to ask myself that question often.

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This past summer, my husband, Ron, and I were in Central America. One afternoon, while eating lunch in a small café, we noticed a family sitting at a table close to us. They were unlike other families we had seen and met during our trip.

I whispered to Ron, “I think that family over there are members of the Church.”

He glanced over at them and replied, “I think you’re right.”

We loitered at our table long after our food was gone, waiting until the family was finished with their lunch so that we could talk with them. We were spot on—they did indeed belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. What gave it away? Several things, actually. It was their outward behavior and mannerisms. The way they were dressed. The orange Fanta they drank with lunch. The language they used—or maybe it was the lack of coarse language that is so prevalent in today’s world. It was their countenance. It was the spirit they exuded. It was obvious. And they just couldn’t help spilling their gospel light all over the café!

What made them stand out? It was the dignity and demeanor of their discipleship!

### **The Dignity and Demeanor of Discipleship**

Dignity and demeanor in our discipleship begin with understanding who we are. Literally and specifically, we are sons and daughters of heavenly parents. We look to our Brother Jesus Christ as our perfect example and seek to emulate the divine attributes He demonstrated throughout His life.

You may be familiar with the story of the young prince who was denied the knowledge of his royalty. As a baby, his parents, the king and queen, placed him in the care of a peasant family in an effort for the prince to grow up to someday be a king who understood the life and needs of his people. He eventually grew to the age when the kingdom would be conferred upon him. He had learned many wonderful things as a young man, such as how to farm and take care of animals. But he knew nothing about being a king or about the responsibilities that lay ahead. He had lost the vision of who he was and his ultimate potential.

We too are heirs to a kingdom—the kingdom of God. Knowing who we are gives us a vision of what we can become. When we remember this important truth about ourselves, it dictates our thoughts and actions. Shouldn’t knowing that divinity dwells within us be reflected in our daily walk, talk, and countenance? Because when we know who we are, we act differently.

In a world filled with labels and titles, we must constantly remind ourselves that the only labels that really matter are those associated with family: daughter, son, brother, sister, mother, father, and so on. Any other titles are ancillary and can place us in a box that limits our divine potential. How we label ourselves often dictates how we treat and respond to others. Remembering our celestial parentage gives us courage and confidence to stand against dangerous decoys that may lead us to think less about ourselves or less about those around us.

President Russell M. Nelson invited us to stand out and be a light—to be different from the world. He said that the Lord needs us to look like, sound like, act like, and dress like true disciples of Jesus Christ. Listen to what our prophet has said:

*With the Holy Ghost as your companion, you can see right through the celebrity culture that has smitten our society. You can be smarter than previous generations have ever been. And if you are sometimes called “weird,” wear that distinction as a badge of honor and be happy that your light is shining brightly in this ever-darkening world!*<sup>1</sup>

I love that the prophet used the word *weird*. In my younger days, if you didn’t go along with the crowd or the ways of the world, you were sometimes called “square.” *Square* is a great word to describe a true disciple of Jesus Christ, since some definitions of *square* are to be exact, straight, and direct. Whatever the term for standing out and being different that you might use, the Lord needs us to be recognizable as His disciples. Although we are cautioned against setting ourselves up as being in any way better than others, the Lord invites us to “let [our] light so shine before men, that they may see [our] good works, and glorify [our] Father which is in heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the primary purposes of our life on earth is to strive to become more like our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. The more we take upon ourselves Their dignified characteristics, the more comfortable we will be in Their presence and the better able we will be to hear the promptings of the Spirit.

So what do dignity and demeanor look like in a true disciple of Jesus Christ? Let me share some examples, specifically as they relate to language and integrity.

### The Language of Discipleship

Have you ever had a first impression of someone that immediately changed when they opened their mouth and started to speak? I'm not talking about accents or poor grammar. I'm talking about the words they use or what they talk about. My favorite quote about language comes from a sixteenth-century English poet and playwright named Ben Jonson:

*Language most shows a man: Speak, that I may see thee. It springs out of the most retired and inmost parts of us, and is the image of the parent of it, the mind. No glass renders a man's form or likeness so true as his speech.*<sup>3</sup>

Have you found this to be true? We can look the part of a clean and modest disciple of Jesus Christ, but does our language reflect His image in our verbal countenance?

I recently read studies suggesting that swearing is a sign of intelligence and that the use of profanity is healthy. They even stated that people who swear are more honest than those who don't.<sup>4</sup>

What a distorted, twisted aberration of moral virtue. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we know instinctively that this is not true. Swearing exhibits an absence of discipline and character. I am sure the Lord is disappointed when those who claim to be His disciples use lewd, vulgar, and sexually explicit language. "Profanity degrades those who use it and . . . speaks to the lowest impulses in [a person]."<sup>5</sup>

Just in case you think this doesn't apply to us, a recent article indicated that Utahns ranked fifth-worst in the country when it comes to swearing.

"Utahns love their swear words, fake or not,"<sup>6</sup> the author noted. Even the use of slang words tends to *dumb us down* and diminish our dignity.

My heart is pierced each time I hear the Lord's name used in an irreverent or vain way.<sup>7</sup> *Vain*, in this case, means to be pointless, empty, or without effect. It is speaking His name without purpose, which in my mind includes substitute words or acronyms that are "like unto it."<sup>8</sup> Considering the magnitude of His love and His sacrifice for us, I cannot fathom speaking His name with anything but reverence. The Lord Himself declared His holy identity and warned how His name should be used:

*Behold, I am Alpha and Omega, even Jesus Christ. Wherefore, let all men beware how they take my name in their lips—  
For behold, verily I say, that many there be who are under this condemnation, who use the name of the Lord, and use it in vain. . . .  
Remember that that which cometh from above is sacred, and must be spoken with care, and by constraint of the Spirit.*<sup>9</sup>

Dignity in speech is not just the words we use. It is also what we talk about. Can we laugh and have fun? Of course! But not at the expense of hurting another. We can be lighthearted without being light-minded, which is defined as being inconsiderate and using "inappropriate levity."<sup>10</sup>

I am always uncomfortable when I hear someone talking negatively about one of God's children, who are literally our brothers and sisters. With plenty of negative forces in the world tearing people down, we can be the counterforce to this type of marring.

As covenant-making disciples of Jesus Christ, we are in the spiritual business of building: Building character. Building each other up. Building a Zion society with the desire to love God and our neighbor.

What about sarcasm? Sarcastic comments are typically intended to be funny, but they can often inflict unseen wounds. Regardless of the intent, sarcastic remarks can pierce the soul like daggers. Perhaps this is because such comments are usually rolled around elements of truth. This is

particularly the case among family members, whom we know well enough to make our sarcastic remarks to them very personal. What might seem comical to one person might be embarrassing or demeaning to another. Like most of us, from time to time I have said something sarcastic that I wish I hadn't said. I have wondered how often I have hurt someone by my use of sarcasm. Since we can't know how sarcasm may hurt others, we should be very careful of its use.

With the blessing of modern technology, many of our conversations have become digital. Just because we are not standing face-to-face with another person does not give us license to be unkind or demeaning or to use rude or foul language.

During the time of King Mosiah, the people of the Church were taught "that they should let no pride nor haughtiness disturb their peace; that every man should esteem his neighbor as himself."<sup>11</sup> We can promote love and unity as we heed the words of the hymn: "Let us oft speak kind words to each other; Kind words are sweet tones of the heart."<sup>12</sup>

Our quest to speak in "sweet tones of the heart" can be tested when unexpected challenges arise. I remember a particular experience of yelling at our children when they broke a favorite glass snow globe my husband had given to me. Although I was careful not to use any demeaning words to them, the decibels of my outburst were deafening. That was more than thirty years ago. But the looks on their little faces still haunt me, as well as the feelings of shame that overtook me due to my impulsive behavior and the immediate withdrawal of the Spirit. I wish I had responded with that "soft answer [which] turneth away wrath."<sup>13</sup>

It is not always anger that prompts us to raise our voices. Sometimes we just want to get someone's attention or we are too lazy to walk into the next room to relay a message. But an elevated tone can quickly raise tension and drive away the Spirit. My in-laws taught their family to "walk to talk." This made the cut of family traditions we chose to bring into our own home. It's funny, now that we are empty nesters, we still sometimes need to remind each other to "walk to talk."

### **Integrity in Discipleship**

Disciples of Jesus Christ radiate His light as they place the integrity of their covenants above the pressure to conform to worldly standards. This means continually striving to be above reproach. The commandment to "let [our] light so shine before men"<sup>14</sup> brings countless opportunities for us to shine. But when we compromise our integrity in any way, that light will dim.

My husband successfully stretched three years of schooling at BYU into five, so you can imagine how thrilled we were when he finally graduated and got a real job in Texas. We were surprised when a coworker suggested that he should not wear his wedding ring in certain settings with young professionals because it might limit his opportunities for success. The deception behind this thought was distasteful and countered everything we had worked for in our celestial marriage. Needless to say, Ron never left our little apartment without wearing his wedding ring!

It is disheartening when covenant-making members of the Church put aside their integrity in an effort to fit into a business or social environment, such as in dress, language, the Word of Wisdom, or honesty.

Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin taught:

*Integrity means always doing what is right and good, regardless of the immediate consequences. . . . Personal integrity implies such trustworthiness and incorruptibility that we are incapable of being false to a trust or covenant.*<sup>15</sup>

Integrity is doing the right thing when no one is watching. But we sometimes forget that someone is always watching. Heavenly Father always knows our thoughts and actions, even when we fail to remember that He is there.

Many years ago, I went outside to take out some trash. When I got to the garbage can, I saw that it had been haphazardly decorated with white spray paint—it was definitely not the work of a skilled artist! I asked our children if anyone knew what had happened to the trash can. They each testified knowing nothing about it, even our five-year-old son, who stood in the kitchen with

white paint in his hair. It was comical to listen to him try to fib his way through his little lie. Even when I put him in front of a mirror and pointed out the paint on his face and in his hair, he still denied any involvement. We laugh about it now and even laughed about it then, but how many times do we look in the mirror and believe the lies, half-truths, or exaggerations we tell ourselves and others?

Robert Louis Stevenson said that “to tell truth . . . is not to state the true facts, but to convey a true impression.”<sup>16</sup>

What prompts this need to exaggerate? Maybe it’s a desire to elevate one’s position or to diminish another’s. When someone consistently exaggerates, it doesn’t take long before he loses credibility. After all, isn’t exaggeration a form of lying? Regardless of what causes this type of behavior, it is inconsistent with the dignity, demeanor, and integrity of discipleship.

Hannah Arendt, a political scientist, said this about lying: “If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer.”<sup>17</sup>

In this digital and social media world, it can be especially easy to misrepresent facts or even ourselves. Being honest not only in what we say and do but also in the perceptions we convey increases our sensitivity to the Spirit. And in a world filled with alternate voices, we need the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost to help us distinguish between truth and error.

I have heard people state that they occasionally lower their standards to be relatable or empathetic to another person. Certainly the Savior reached down to look into the eyes of another person, but He never stayed there. He never changed His standards or principles in an effort to be a relatable friend. He always took them by the hand and brought them up to where He was standing. He raised them up and left them better than they previously were.

Beginning with our baptismal covenant, we have promised “to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places.”<sup>18</sup> That might sound simple enough, but have you ever stepped foot into the But’s Club?

You become a member of the But’s Club when you start making exceptions or saying “but” to the promise of being a witness. Here are a few examples:

I will stand as a witness “of God at all times and in all things, and in all places,”

- but not when it’s inconvenient.
- but not while I’m on vacation.
- but not when I want to fit in.

How about this one?

- I will always follow the prophets, but \_\_\_\_\_.

The But’s Club is a dangerous place to hang out. Yet the pressure to fit in with the rest of the world can cause us to compromise our standards or even to break precious covenants.

So what do we do when we have picked up a bad habit or characteristic inconsistent with our discipleship? We must shed it.

While Ron and I were in Central America, we took a walk through a beautiful park. While in the park, two trees caught our attention. These two trees live side by side and receive the same amount of rain, live in the same soil, and share the same rain-forest ecosystem. One of the trees is slowly being strangled by vines that suck the nutrients from it and that will eventually kill the tree. The other tree has no vines or other foliage growing on it. As it grows it sheds its bark and anything growing on it. It is able to grow straight toward the sun. It does not let anything slow it down, zap it of its energy, or strangle it. It literally sheds anything that is unnecessary to reach its potential.

In our quest to be true disciples of our Savior Jesus Christ, I invite you to consider those things that might strangle your light. What habits can you shed that will allow your light to shine in a way that you unmistakably stand as a witness “of God at all times and in all things, and in all places”?

Standing as a witness of God means standing out. There is always a right way to do the right thing. I testify that we are sons and daughters of

exalted heavenly parents. Knowing our identity fortifies us against our culture of comparing, complaining, and criticizing.

As we consistently strive for refinement in our dignity and demeanor as disciples of Jesus Christ, our confidence will “wax strong in the presence of God.”<sup>19</sup> And we will be blessed with an abundance of the Spirit, with personal revelation, and with an increased love of God and our neighbors.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Russell M. Nelson, in Russell M. Nelson and Wendy W. Nelson, “Hope of Israel,” worldwide youth devotional, 3 June 2018, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2018/08-se/hope-of-israel?lang=eng](http://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2018/08-se/hope-of-israel?lang=eng).
2. Matthew 5:16; see also 3 Nephi 12:16.
3. Ben Jonson, *Timber; or, Discoveries Made upon Men and Matter* (1641).
4. See Sandee LaMotte, “Why Swearing Is a Sign of Intelligence, Helps Manage Pain and More,” *Mindfulness*, CNN Health, 21 April 2021, [cnn.com/2021/01/26/health/swearing-benefits-wellness/index.html](http://cnn.com/2021/01/26/health/swearing-benefits-wellness/index.html); see also Alex Orlando, “Worried About Swearing Too Much? Science Says You Shouldn’t Be,” *Health*, *Discover*, 14 January 2020, [discovermagazine.com/health/worried-about-your-foul-mouth-swearing-could-actually-be-good-for-you](http://discovermagazine.com/health/worried-about-your-foul-mouth-swearing-could-actually-be-good-for-you).
5. Greg Bell, “Profanity in Media Coarsens Our Society,” *Opinion*, *Deseret News*, 17 March 2017, [deseret.com/2017/3/17/20608436/profanity-in-media-coarsens-our-society](http://deseret.com/2017/3/17/20608436/profanity-in-media-coarsens-our-society).
6. Robert J. DeBry and Associates, “How Utah Residents Rank in Using Profanity Compared to Other States,” Brandview, KSL.com, 5 October 2021, [ksl.com/article/50246931/how-utah-residents-rank-in-using-profanity-compared-to-other-states](http://ksl.com/article/50246931/how-utah-residents-rank-in-using-profanity-compared-to-other-states).
7. See Exodus 20:7.
8. Doctrine and Covenants 59:6.
9. Doctrine and Covenants 63:60–62, 64.
10. Dictionary.net, s.v. “light-minded.”
11. Mosiah 27:4.
12. “Let Us Oft Speak Kind Words,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 232.
13. Proverbs 15:1.
14. Matthew 5:16.
15. Joseph B. Wirthlin, “Personal Integrity,” *Ensign*, May 1990.
16. Robert Louis Stevenson, “Virginibus Puerisque IV: The Truth of Intercourse,” *Virginibus Puerisque and Other Papers* (1881).
17. Hannah Arendt, in an interview with Roger Errera, October 1973, for *Un Certain Regard*, Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française (ORTF), broadcast in France, 6 July 1974; “Video. Hannah Arendt and Roger Errera, 1973,” Hannah Arendt Center for Political Studies, University of Verona, 1 November 2016, [arendtcenter.it/en/2016/11/01/entretien-entre-hannah-arendt-et-roger-errera](http://arendtcenter.it/en/2016/11/01/entretien-entre-hannah-arendt-et-roger-errera); extracted comments published in Hannah Arendt, “Hannah Arendt: From an Interview,” *New York Review of Books* 25, no. 16 (26 October 1978): 18.
18. Mosiah 18:9.
19. Doctrine and Covenants 121:45.