

Jesus Christ, the Greatest Influencer in Your Life

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For a moment, flash back with me to the 1980s. For me as a young girl, it was a joyous time of jelly shoes, leg warmers, and perms. I listened to my favorite music on cassette tapes and watched movies on VHS. I even talked to my friends behind a closed door on a phone tethered to an extra-long cord that stretched all the way to our kitchen. It was not a time of selfies, cell phones, streaming, or social media. When my parents told me to follow the prophet, do you think they fathomed the day when I could interpret that to mean that I should follow the prophet's social media account?

Throughout my life I have found that the more I follow the prophet and study his teachings, the more I come to know him. Have you ever realized that the more time you spend observing celebrities, athletes, and social media stars, the more they begin to feel like friends? You Swifties know exactly what I am talking about. You may have formed a tight bond with Taylor Swift, but, sadly, she does not know you. One-sided relationships

like these are common. It is the reason I did not hesitate to lay down some cash to snap a picture with my favorite childhood TV star—and then I was disappointed when she did not want to reminisce.

Online networks have expanded the number of influencers in our lives. Now, at the tap of a screen, you can follow trendy online fashionistas who provide self-help tips and follow Church leaders who inspire you to become better. By their very nature, online influencers inspire you, relate to you, and help you feel seen and heard. They are people you want to emulate.

I asked a group of BYU students to think about the influencers who were positively impacting their lives and what characteristics those influencers exhibited. Among all the traits students identified, there was one trait mentioned more than any other: kindness.

Those people who made a positive impact on students' lives showed them kindness personally or administered compassion to others. These

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people were quick to show humility, empathy, forgiveness, meekness, and love. They listened without judgment and loved without boundaries. Their actions embodied the love of Christ. One student described an influencer in her life by saying, “She is someone I have been able to express my feelings to and with whom I feel heard and loved. We can laugh and cry together [in] a judgment-free environment. I feel valued when I am around her.”

Influencers who make the biggest impact are heroes who step up to provide comfort when you need comfort. They find ways to help you when you are mourning.¹ They embody Christ’s love.

Children provide some of the best examples of how to administer Christ’s love. After spending a long, hot day at an amusement park with my three nieces (ages six, ten, and eleven), my brother, my husband, and I found ourselves in line for a much-anticipated water ride. As the kids were most excited about this ride—and we did not want to disappoint—we all hopped into the end of the line for what was projected to be a ninety-minute wait.

After fifteen minutes of attempting to keep ourselves and the kids entertained, it was clear that we had lost their attention and that they were bored. Instead of turning to complaining, the kids instinctively turned their attention to the other people in line. It did not take long for my three nieces to make friends with three teenagers who were standing in line right in front of us. Soon all six of them were laughing, talking, and joking together. Even after what had turned into more than two hours of standing in line, the kids never complained because they were focused on someone else.

Without having spent time talking with the teens, we would never have learned that the woman accompanying them was not their mother. The teenagers were with their aunt, who had taken the kids away for a weekend after their mother’s funeral. All three teenagers were now learning what it was like to be orphans.

Gratefully, that day three little girls in a long line at an amusement park showed me how to truly minister to and uplift those around me. How many people who are figuratively in line next to you have “hands [that] hang down” or

“feeble knees” that need strengthening?² You never know what hardships or difficulties others are experiencing, and you never know the impact your interactions will have on them. Turning your focus to other people can have a healing effect that helps lift burdens and mend broken hearts. But sometimes doing good requires taking off your headphones, putting down your smartphone, and interacting with a huge smile.

Simple acts of judgment-free kindness, rendered through the pure love of Christ, have the power to part gray clouds and allow rays of sunshine to descend into our lives.

Choosing to #FollowHim

During His earthly ministry, Jesus Christ called twelve apostles, whom He called His disciples. Specifically, while Simon Peter and his brother Andrew were fishing, Jesus called to them, saying, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”³

After being called, each of the disciples actively chose to follow Jesus Christ throughout His ministry. They watched Him perform numerous selfless acts, including calming the sea,⁴ casting out devils,⁵ healing the sick,⁶ cleansing the lepers,⁷ and making it possible for His disciples to catch a multitude of fish when there didn’t seem to be any fish around.⁸

Despite having witnessed Jesus compassionately loving and serving others, these twelve apprentices still had much to learn. After three years, near the end of the Lord’s mortal ministry, during what the world calls the Last Supper, Jesus taught His followers a valuable lesson. Prior to eating, He began washing their feet. This job “was usually performed by the lowest level of servants.”⁹

Peter, very uncomfortable with the idea of having Jesus scrub his dirty feet, said, “Thou shalt never wash my feet.”¹⁰

The Lord told Peter that if He did not wash Peter’s feet, Peter would have “no part with [Him].”¹¹

So Peter then said, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.”¹²

Once the disciples’ feet had been cleansed, Jesus provided His next instruction:

If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

*For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.*¹³

He continued:

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*¹⁴

Jesus wanted His disciples to reach out and inspire others, find ways to relate to others, and help others know they were loved. He wanted His disciples to humble themselves and minister.

But Peter's commitment was not as strong as he thought. At the Last Supper, he told Jesus he would never deny Him, but before the next morning Peter had denied knowing Jesus three times.¹⁵

Our Father in Heaven expects disciples of Jesus Christ to do more than metaphorically click on a "follow" button and proclaim casual interest in His Son. Heart emojis, high fives, and hug GIFs are kind gestures that have the potential to show that we "like" Jesus Christ, but they are insufficient proclamations of our discipleship. These actions tell the world that we follow Jesus Christ and that we subscribe to His ideas, beliefs, and teachings. But following the Savior and becoming a disciple is more than proclaiming love for Him; it requires keeping His commandments and loving others as He loves them.

After Jesus's death and Resurrection, the apostles decided to go back to the Sea of Galilee to fish. Jesus surprised them by meeting them once again where He had first called Peter.

The Savior later asked Peter, "Lovest thou me?" Three times He repeated this question.

Peter, most likely heartbroken, each time responded, "Thou knowest that I love thee."¹⁶

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland elaborated on and described what might have been the Savior's response to Peter and the other apostles at this moment in time:

*"Then Peter, why are you here? Why are we back on this same shore, by these same nets, having this same conversation? Wasn't it obvious then and isn't it obvious now that if I want fish, I can get fish? What I need, Peter, are disciples—and I need them forever. I need someone to feed my sheep and save my lambs. I need someone to preach my gospel and defend my faith. I need someone who loves me, truly, truly loves me, and loves what our Father in Heaven has commissioned me to do. Ours is not a feeble message. It is not a fleeting task. It is not hapless; it is not hopeless; it is not to be consigned to the ash heap of history. It is the work of Almighty God, and it is to change the world. So, Peter, for the second and presumably the last time, I am asking you to leave all this and to go teach and testify, labor and serve loyally until the day in which they will do to you exactly what they did to me."*¹⁷

How many times do we go fishing when we should be serving?

Peter's transformation was not a one-time event. It was a lifelong process. Beginning at the shores of Galilee, Peter was taught and molded into what the Lord needed him to become:

*Peter was the chief apostle of his day; and after the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Savior, it was Peter who called the Church together and acted in the office of his calling as the one who possessed the keys of the priesthood.*¹⁸

Are we not all apprentices learning to follow the Master Teacher? As His students, we need to carefully study His words, follow His example, and then gain valuable experiences applying His teachings. We need to love one another. President Russell M. Nelson taught, "One of the easiest ways to identify a *true follower* of Jesus Christ is how compassionately that person treats other people."¹⁹

Loving as Jesus Loves; Forgiving as Jesus Forgives

My paternal grandfather, Von Grundvig, had a great influence on my life. When he was thirteen months old, his sweet grandparents began raising him because both of his parents had tragically passed away. His father had died in a snow avalanche, and his mother had died when her car

unexpectedly rolled through a fence and off a cliff. Von grew up in a rural southern Utah community located about sixteen miles from Price. At age seventeen, during World War II, he chose to join the United States Navy.

During his military service, he regularly sent money home to help support his grandmother. As you might imagine, this selfless act was gratefully received. But the story does not end there. His grandmother decided not to use the money for herself. Instead she saved the money under a mattress for when Von returned from the war. Later, after Von had returned home, his grandmother, obviously eager and excited to give him the money, found it was missing. Someone had stolen the money.

While I love a good happily-ever-after, this story does not end with recovering the money. Nor does it end with bitterness and regret. This story ends with a quiet, humble, obedient man who loved God and who showed his love by forgiving and moving on. I can remember my grandfather saying that he hoped someone was able to use the money for a good purpose.

In his final general conference address, Elder Robert D. Hales reminded us:

As we earnestly strive to be true disciples of Jesus Christ, . . . there will be no disparity between the kindness we show our enemies and the kindness we bestow on our friends. We will be as honest when no one is looking as when others are watching. We will be as devoted to God in the public square as we are in our private closet.²⁰

The Pecking Order and the Second Great Commandment

Near the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, eggs were hard to come by, so my husband and I decided it was time to get backyard chickens. During her first Utah winter, Alvin, our top chicken and spunkiest hen, who, yes, was named after a chipmunk, stopped eating and got deathly ill. To nurse her back to health, we brought her inside and started force-feeding her medicine from a syringe. After a couple of weeks, she started to regain her strength, so we decided to let her outside for a few hours.

As the other five hearty chickens eagerly ran to greet me, I set Alvin down. Then, to my horror, one by one, Alvin aggressively pecked and attacked each of the other hens. Alvin, my smallest hen, barely well enough to walk, made sure the hens did not forget that she was at the top of the pecking order. As top chicken in my flock, Alvin feeds first, expects to get the best nesting box for laying eggs, and sleeps in the best spot on the perch at night. She has no problem pecking the other chickens and putting them in their place.

Chickens love to feed together, preen together, and stay together. Despite their close-knit community, they are prone to bullying and harassing any chicken they deem as being weaker, different, injured, or new.

When it comes to God's children, there is no pecking order. One person does not stand above another. Comparing yourself to others or demeaning them does not increase your value or make you better. There is no joy in jealousy, no progression in putting others down, and no strength in backstabbing. These things lead to low self-esteem, incorrect self-expectations, and wasted time and effort.

Digital media has expanded our influence around the globe and, in the process, has stripped away the moral inhibitions that should guide our behavior when we interact with children of God. How you express yourself and what you say to others—and about others—matters, even when you cannot see the person on the other side of your screen.

The very nature of digital media makes it all too easy to hide behind a screen and actively argue, complain, and poke fun at others. You do not have to look very far to see a lack of empathy accompanied by devious and manipulative behaviors online. Internet trolling, cyberstalking, and cyberbullying may be fun for the messenger, but they can be devastating for the person who receives the messages. It is not okay to send threatening, offensive, intimidating, insulting, or hateful messages.

In March 1832, Joseph Smith, the Prophet of the Restoration, was captured by an angry mob because he was preaching something new and

different. His captors beat him and stripped him of his clothes. Then they scratched him and slathered his body with hot tar.²¹ Although tarring and feathering is not a common practice today, the mob mentality associated with it has found its way online, as we see public mocking, shaming, and actions aimed at destroying the reputations of others.

When the Pharisees and scribes brought forward a woman whom they had found committing sin and suggested that she should be stoned, Jesus responded, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.”²² Jesus’s words are as true now as they were then. It is not our responsibility to expose what we believe to be the flaws and foibles of others.

The morning after Joseph had been tarred and feathered, he stood to “meekly [preach] a sermon” to “mobbers and members alike.”²³ Like Joseph Smith, we must follow Jesus Christ’s example and learn to forgive. You cannot control what others say or do, but you can control what you say and how you react.

Our Father in Heaven’s work and glory is the salvation of all mankind.²⁴ We can assist in that work, for

*we believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men. . . . If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.*²⁵

“Jesus, our Savior, was the epitome of kindness and compassion.”²⁶ He showed us that you do not have to think the same or be the same to listen, learn, lift, and love.²⁷ As you listen to others, you will find greater wisdom and you will develop deeper and stronger relationships. To get along, we must take the higher road; we must focus on building bridges of respect across the rivers that divide us.

Research shows that when we feel loved and when we believe we matter, we have a greater sense of self-worth and a positive self-esteem. Feeling this way improves our physical and psychological well-being and we are happier. This is as true for humans as it is for rabbits. Researchers found that when rabbits with an unhealthy

lifestyle received an extra measure of love in the form of being held and lovingly talked to, the rabbits had better health outcomes than the rabbits who were not given the same type of care.²⁸

From the mouth of Jesus Christ Himself on through Peter and the early apostles and then through Joseph Smith and the prophets and apostles in our day, we continue to be admonished to love one another.

President Nelson said:

We are all connected—very literally—as family. Thus, we have a God-ordained responsibility to make life better for each other.

We do not have to act alike or look alike to love each other. We can disagree on a matter without being disagreeable. If we have any hope of creating the goodwill and sense of humanity for which we all yearn, it must begin with each of us, one person and one interaction at a time.

*May we as sons and daughters of God—as eternal brothers and sisters—do all within our power to build up each other, learn from each other and demonstrate respect for all of God’s children. May we link arms in love and brotherhood.*²⁹

As we implement the Savior’s teachings, perhaps we should follow the example of Bertha Day, the great-grandmother of my graduate research assistant. Bertha was known for saying:

Everybody ought to come into this world with the words “Love Me” in flashing lights across their forehead. It is all anybody ever wants. It is what we have in common. We have to remember the need is there even if the words are not. Then we should act accordingly and follow the directions.

The Power of Your Influence

As I was preparing for this speech, one of my students offered me some much-needed courage. He said, “Be brave to say what is true and what you are still learning.” His words give me strength because, like you, I am still learning. But isn’t that the point?

The Lord takes us as we are and uses us to bless and influence the lives of His children. If you want to make a difference and create lasting

change in this world, be kinder, cast fewer stones, and peck at each other less. Civilly stand up for what is right and then do what is right. Find ways to reach out and inspire others, relate to others, and help others feel valued. As we learn in a quote often attributed to Gandhi, “You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do nothing, there will be no result.”

I have never considered myself to be a runner or a part of the running community, but as a BYU student—because of the influence of great friends who were avid runners—I started participating in 5K runs. During my first official 5K at BYU, I learned a valuable lesson. I had covered a considerable distance during the race before I realized that my roommate, who was one of my dear friends, was still running by my side. She was a strong runner. Instead of taking off without me and placing in the top five, she chose to stay with me until I had crossed the finish line.

That same day, my roommate’s brother—a runner on BYU’s cross-country team who happened to be another of my good friends—decided to run the 5K course as well. I will never forget the love I felt as my roommate and I ran around the BYU campus together and were greeted by her brother, who, after having finished the course, turned around and returned to find us.

You would think that in a sea of 2,000 runners who were all aiming for the same destination, I would instinctively feel like a runner or a part of the 5K community. But the reason I felt I belonged was because my friends had reached out and had made me feel that I mattered, no matter my running ability or my pace.

Just being a member of a community does not mean each person feels they belong. Each of us is running through life in a race that can feel lonely and difficult. What a blessing it is when others reach out and help us realize that no matter our weaknesses or personal failings, we belong.

Speaking here at BYU, Sister Sharon Eubank said, “In the same way as the Savior, you yourself are one of the best gifts that you can give to other people in need.”³⁰

Do not underestimate the power you possess to make a difference.

Making Jesus Christ the Greatest Influencer in Your Life

Just as the Lord called to Peter, He is calling to us today, saying, “Come, follow me. Come be my disciples.”

Today, more than ever, Jesus Christ needs you to come and #FollowHim. He needs you to transform toxicity into tranquility and pandemonium into peace. He needs you to change the world one kind act at a time.

Becoming a true disciple of Jesus Christ is a life-changing and life-altering experience. As each of us is going through a transformative process of becoming, we need to forgive more and judge less. There are times when each of us can do better—when we can be kinder, more compassionate, and more forgiving. And when, like Peter, we do not get it right, He wants us to try again and keep following Him.

There are a variety of influencers vying for your attention. If you are seeking influencers who can give you guidance, follow Jesus Christ and His prophets. Jesus Christ is the most important influencer ever to have lived. He is the most important influencer you can follow.

The more you get to know Jesus Christ, the more you will learn that you are not engaging in a one-sided fangirl or fanboy relationship. He knows you and He loves you. As you look to Him, He will inspire you, relate to you, and help you feel seen and heard. And then He will accomplish His work through you. He will make you an influence for good.

When you make Jesus Christ the greatest influencer in your life and truly follow Him, you will begin to act as He would act and love as He would love. You will begin to see others as He sees them.

That each of us may heed His call and #FollowHim is my prayer. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Mosiah 18:9.
2. Doctrine and Covenants 81:5.
3. Matthew 4:19; see also verses 18–22.
4. See Matthew 8:23–27.
5. See Matthew 8:28–33.
6. See Matthew 8:14–15.

7. See Luke 5:12–14.
8. See Luke 5:1–11.
9. “John 13:6–10. Peter Objected and Then Consented to Having the Savior Wash His Feet,” in chapter 25, “John 11–13,” *New Testament Student Manual: Religion 211–212*, May 2018 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 242.
10. John 13:8.
11. John 13:8.
12. John 13:9.
13. John 13:14–15.
14. John 13:34–35.
15. See Matthew 26:31, 33–35, 69–75.
16. John 21:15–17.
17. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The First Great Commandment,” *Ensign*, November 2012.
18. Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Peter”; see also Acts 1:2.
19. Russell M. Nelson, “Peacemakers Needed,” *Liahona*, May 2023; emphasis in original.
20. Robert D. Hales, “Becoming a Disciple of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” *Ensign*, May 2017.
21. See “The Tarring and Feathering of Joseph Smith,” *History of the Saints* (blog), 13 June 2014, historyofthesaints.org/the-tarring-and-feathering-of-joseph-smith.
22. John 8:7.
23. “The Tarring and Feathering of Joseph Smith.”
24. See Moses 1:39.
25. Articles of Faith 1:13.
26. Joseph B. Wirthlin, “The Virtue of Kindness,” *Ensign*, May 2005; quoted in Thomas S. Monson, “Kindness, Charity, and Love,” *Ensign*, May 2017.
27. See Ezra Taft Benson, “Beware of Pride,” *Ensign*, May 1989; see also Kevin J. Worthen, “Choose to Be Humble,” BYU devotional address, 4 January 2022.
28. See Robert M. Nerem, Murina J. Levesque, and J. Fredrick Cornhill, “Social Environment as a Factor in Diet-Induced Atherosclerosis,” *Science* 208, no. 4451 (27 June 1980): 1475–76; see also Kelli Harding, *The Rabbit Effect: Live Longer, Happier, and Healthier with the Groundbreaking Science of Kindness* (New York: Atria Books, 2019), xxiii–xxv; both referenced in Gary E. Stevenson, “Hearts Knit Together,” *Liahona*, May 2021.
29. Russell M. Nelson, Morehouse College address, Atlanta, Georgia, 13 April 2023; transcript available at Nelson, “Morehouse College Peace Prize Award Acceptance Message,” Newsroom, Church of Jesus Christ, newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/morehouse-college-peace-prize-award-acceptance-message.
30. Sharon Eubank, “Turning Enemies into Friends,” BYU forum address, 23 January 2018.