

Character

CECIL O. SAMUELSON

Good morning, brothers and sisters. I appreciate this opportunity to add my welcome to all gathered today as we begin the new fall semester. It is a season of anticipation, planning, excitement, and perhaps even a little trepidation for those adjusting to all that goes on in this special place. We are very glad that you have chosen BYU and are qualified to be here.

At Brigham Young University we must always remember, reflect upon, and recall our fundamental purposes for being at this unique institution. As the semester progresses, all of us will likely be increasingly consumed with the demands and details of our daily tasks, which, at least superficially, are similar to or even much the same as we would encounter at another serious university. If we are not careful, papers, presentations, examinations, and other expectations will crowd out the higher or greater purposes for which BYU was established and the reasons for which we each decided to come and devote our time and energy.

Over the years I and many others have spoken at length and in some detail about the Aims of a BYU Education. I hope and expect we will continue to do so. I think virtually everyone seriously committed to BYU and our

view of education will be able to recite without difficulty the expected outcomes of the BYU experience, which are that it should be spiritually strengthening, intellectually enlarging, and character building, and then leading to a lifetime of learning and service.

Without apology, I recognize that I have frequently emphasized the spiritually strengthening aspect of our efforts because it is unique in the world of higher education. Likewise, I have taken seriously and publicly the charge from our prophet leaders to make sure our academic and intellectual pursuits are of the highest order and quality. In addition, it is my perception that in our devotional services we are frequently reminded of the responsibilities and opportunities to provide meaningful service now and in the future. I continue to endorse and commend these initiatives and efforts.

Today I wish to focus my remarks on the importance of our individual character and on what we need to do to build and strengthen it as envisioned by the Savior and His duly selected prophet leaders. There are many

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definitions of character, but one simple idea articulated by someone long ago seems most satisfactory to me: “A man’s reputation is the opinion people have of him. His character is what he [or she] really is” (Jack Miner).

I hope in our time together this morning we can think carefully and seriously about what we really are and, more important, what we desire and need to become. I am satisfied that this aim of a BYU education—to build character—cannot be neglected or diminished because all of the aims and the mission of this great university are so intimately related to one another.

While growing up I remember the rather constant counsel from parents, teachers, Church leaders, and others to guard one’s reputation. Most of us learned rather early that it was not a good thing to have a bad reputation about anything. While I still think this is good advice, I also believe that character—real character—is more important than just a good reputation. The reason for this assertion is that each of us is in complete control of our actual character while public opinion, slander, and misrepresentation on the part of others may influence one’s reputation.

For example, it is not too rare to learn in the media of someone with an apparently stellar reputation who has been found involved in a large variety of unsavory activities that usually demonstrate that the person has taken advantage of another in ways unfair and often illegal. On the other side, there are those like the Prophet Joseph Smith and others even in our day who have impeccable character but suffer regular unfair and untrue assaults on their reputation. Such, for example, might occur during a political campaign.

In a similar vein, I have always liked the observation made in various settings by Elder Neal A. Maxwell that it is better to have character than to be one (see “The Disciple-Scholar,” in Henry B. Eyring, ed., *On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft,

1995], 21; also “Sharing Insights from My Life,” BYU devotional address, 12 January 1999). I admit that some of my favorite people are both.

As a young man, I was impressed by the comments often made by President David O. McKay about the importance of good character. Let me share just a couple of examples. First, in answer to the question “What do you consider is the most important purpose of life?” he responded, “To develop a noble character” (quoted in Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* [Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005], 11). Second is a statement very close to home as we think about the Aims of a BYU Education. Said he:

*Character is the aim of true education; and science, history, and literature are but means used to accomplish this desired end. Character is not the result of chance, but of continuous right thinking and right acting. True education seeks to make men and women not only good mathematicians, proficient linguists, profound scientists, or brilliant literary lights, but also, honest men [and women], with virtue, temperance, and brotherly love. It seeks to make men and women who prize truth, justice, wisdom, benevolence, and self-control as the choicest acquisitions of a successful life. [David O. McKay, quoted in *Rise of Modern Mormonism*, 160]*

I believe it fair to say that President McKay felt character building was of equal rank with spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging as primary educational goals for both individuals and institutions. From the very beginning this attitude has also prevailed with the administration and faculty of BYU. Karl G. Maeser was known for his deep, unswerving commitment to all three legs of the BYU stool that are now known as our Aims. As was the case then, and so it remains today, our students, staff, and faculty do not arrive as blank pages, and so we must

always give great credit to families, preparatory schools, and the Church for the quality of people who come and so readily adopt the Aims of a BYU Education, including the necessity of character building.

One such product of the early Brigham Young Academy was James E. Talmage. He was recognized quickly for his great intellect, spiritual strength, and outstanding character. As he concluded his studies at BYA, he became a member of the faculty and then left for a few years to obtain his graduate education at Lehigh University and Johns Hopkins University before returning to BYA and the Church Educational System. Of course his crowning appointment was to serve as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and his many contributions are widely known and appreciated throughout the Church. *Jesus the Christ* and *The Articles of Faith* are two books that continue to be classics in Church literature and deserve our careful and regular study in our libraries of "best books" (D&C 88:118).

Two accounts of his character (perhaps showing that he also was a character) are found in *The Talmage Story*, the biography written by his son, John. These accounts have been favorites of mine for many years, and some of you are likely familiar with these experiences. I believe they deserve retelling because they not only reveal much about Brother Talmage but also give significant insights into important dimensions of character.

Let me go directly to the experiences as the younger Brother Talmage recorded them. Both occurred when James Talmage was a mature man. The first was shortly after he left the Church Educational System and became president of the University of Utah at the encouragement of the First Presidency. He had obtained a bicycle, which was then the newest fad in transportation during the 1890s. These are his son's words:

James acquired one of the new machines, not as a hobby or physical conditioner but as a practical means of transportation. . . .

Some time after James had achieved reasonable proficiency in handling his machine on standard roads, he showed up at the front door one evening a full hour late for dinner and scarcely recognizable.

May [his wife] nearly went into shock, for her husband was a frightening sight. Battered, bruised, and bleeding profusely, clothes torn in a dozen places and covered with dust and mud, James looked as though he had been caught in a riot, or at least a fight of unusual violence. Neither, it developed, had been the case.

Half a block from the Talmage home a single-plank footbridge crossed the ditch of running water that separated the street from the footpath. Until now, James had dismounted when he reached this point in a homeward journey, and crossed the narrow bridge on foot. Today, he had decided that he had reached the point in his development as a cyclist where he should no longer resort to this prudent maneuver, but rather ride over the bridge in the manner of an accomplished veteran of the two-wheeler.

Having so decided, James approached the bridge resolutely, confident that he would negotiate the tricky passage in a manner to be proud of and to impress neighbors, if any should chance to be watching, with his skill and casual daring. He turned sharply from the road toward the bridge with scarcely any diminution of speed. The result was spectacular, and observers, if any there were, must indeed have been impressed, but in a very different way from that intended. The professor's bicycle went onto the plank at an oblique angle and quickly slid off the side, throwing its rider heavily into the ditch bank.

Dazed, bruised, bleeding, and humiliated, Dr. Talmage was not convinced that the difficult maneuver was beyond his skill. Rather, he was stubbornly determined to prove that he could and would master the difficulty.

For the next hour, [James] might have been observed trundling his bicycle fifty yards or so

*down the road from the bridge, mounting and riding furiously toward the plank crossing, turning onto it with grim-lipped determination—and plunging off it in a spectacular and bone-shaking crash into the rough ditch bank. Uncounted times this startling performance was repeated, but in the end mind triumphed over matter, willpower over faltering reflexes, and the crossing was successfully made. Not just once, but enough times in succession to convince James that he was capable of performing the feat without mishap at any time he might desire to do so. From then on, he never again dismounted to cross the bridge, albeit he never made the crossing without experiencing deep-seated qualms which he kept carefully concealed from any who might be watching. [John R. Talmage, *The Talmage Story: Life of James E. Talmage—Educator, Scientist, Apostle* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1972), 138–40]*

This is an interesting insight into a man who believed something likely trivial to most people was not only worth doing but worth doing well. This same unflinching determination was demonstrated much later in a more widely recognized sense when Brother Talmage literally lived in the Salt Lake Temple as he wrote his famous and beloved book *Jesus the Christ* at the direction of the First Presidency. His absolute commitment to completing a task he determined to be important, whatever anyone else might think, served him very well throughout his life and, in turn, blessed and continues to bless countless others.

The other account I will share—which most will also likely find amusing—occurred while he was serving as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. Although usually a strength, his dogged determination and almost complete focus on his work was also a cause for worry on occasion not only for his family but also for the top leadership of the Church. Let me again return to the account recorded by John Talmage:

In later years, James' long hours of work, unrelieved by periods of recreation, were cause for real concern among family, friends, and associates. President Heber J. Grant [the president of the Church], for one, repeatedly urged Dr. Talmage to take up some form of sport, if only for its therapeutic value. Himself an enthusiastic golfer, President Grant tried to get his friend to try that sport, confident (as are all golfers) that if anyone were once thoroughly exposed to golf he would be captivated by its subtle but powerful attractions.

As President Grant's urgings increased in frequency and intensity, so did Dr. Talmage's demurrers on the grounds of lack of interest and lack of ability to master a complicated skill so late in life. President Grant was certain the skill could be mastered and that interest would automatically follow. Finally a compromise was reached, and a test agreed upon: James would give the game of golf an honest trial, and work at it until he was able to hit a drive which President Grant would rate as satisfactory, "a real golf shot."

"If you hit just one really good drive, nature will do the rest," President Grant assured his pupil-to-be. "You won't be able to resist the game after that."

It was agreed that James would make his own choice after he had acquired the skill to hit the specified shot. If he felt the fascination of the game, as President Grant was certain he would, he would take up golf and play with reasonable regularity. If, after giving the game a fair trial, James still felt no interest, President Grant would cease his efforts to get Dr. Talmage to play.

On an appointed day, the two, accompanied by a number of others of the General Authorities who played golf and who had joined the friendly argument on the side of President Grant, proceeded to Nibley Park for James' first session in what was expected to be a series of lessons.

James removed his coat and was shown how to grip the club and take his stance at the ball. The coordinated movements involved in making a golf stroke were carefully explained and then demonstrated by President Grant and by others. Finally it came James' turn to try it himself.

What followed astonished all those who watched, and probably James himself. Instead of missing the ball completely, or weakly pushing it a few feet along the grass, James somehow managed to strike the ball cleanly and with substantial force. It took off in a fine arc and with only a minimum amount of slice. Some who saw it described it later as “a truly magnificent drive,” which was probably a considerable exaggeration. However, there was consensus that the ball went close to 200 yards and stayed in the fairway. It was a drive that would have gladdened the heart of any golfer short of the expert class, and it bordered on the phenomenal for a novice.

The spectators were momentarily struck dumb, then burst into enthusiastic applause.

“Congratulations,” said President Grant, rushing forward, beaming, with outstretched hand. “That was a fine shot you will remember for the rest of your life.”

“You mean **that** was a fully satisfactory golf shot?” James asked, cautiously.

“It certainly was!” said President Grant.

“Then I have fulfilled my part of the agreement?”

“You have—and don’t you feel the thrill of excitement? Now you’ll be playing regularly. As a matter of fact, we can go into the clubhouse now and I will help you select a set of clubs.”

“Thank you,” said James, putting on his coat. “If I have carried out my part of the agreement, then I shall call on you to live up to yours. You promised that if I hit a satisfactory drive and did

not feel the spontaneous desire to play, you would stop urging me to do so. Now I should like to get back to the office, where I have a great deal of work waiting.”

So far as is known, James never again struck a golf ball, or made the attempt. [The Talmage Story, 226–28; emphasis in original]

It is very clear that Brother Talmage was always absolutely supportive and obedient to the prophet on matters of doctrine, principle, and Church practice or procedure, but he did not consider his loyalty to the Brethren to extend to their love of golf!

Brother Talmage was his own man, but he was also a man of impeccable character. He decided to do what he considered was really important and deflected those things of lesser or no priority. Perhaps there is a lesson here for us with respect to video games, social media, television, and other activities you might think about.

At BYU we have the good fortune of being surrounded by many impressive examples of people with genuine, sterling character. Might we each do what we must to ensure that our own personal character comes as close as possible to that of the Savior, whom we know to be of perfect character, even the Lord Jesus Christ, of whom I testify, in His sacred name, Jesus Christ, amen.