

Kindness: A Celestial Touchstone

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I am blessed to work and serve in the David O. McKay School of Education. President McKay was a great prophet and educator—the beloved prophet of my youth. He spoke often about the importance of noble character. A summary of his teachings would be that the highest purpose of education is not just to teach facts, however important they may be, but to train the mind, to make good citizens, and to develop character.

My message today is really quite simple but, I believe, very important. My focus is primarily on one specific virtue of a noble character: constantly acting with kindness. President Ezra Taft Benson defined kindness as follows:

One who is kind is sympathetic and gentle with others. He is considerate of others' feelings and courteous in his behavior. He has a helpful nature. Kindness pardons others' weaknesses and faults. Kindness is extended to all. [CR, October 1986, 62; "Godly Characteristics of the Master," Ensign, November 1986, 47]

In the context of the gospel, acts of kindness are not optional. They are a responsibility, even a covenant. In a BYU devotional President Gordon B. Hinckley emphasized this responsibility:

*It is a responsibility divinely laid upon us to bear one another's burdens, to strengthen one another, to encourage one another, to lift one another, to look for the good in one another, and to emphasize that good. ["Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled" (29 October 1974), in *Speeches of the Year, 1974* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 272]*

President McKay spoke of kindness as a temple covenant in his remarks prior to the first session of the dedicatory services for the Oakland Temple. He taught:

*There are certain obligations taken by those who make covenants at the altar and those obligations must be manifest after they go out of the Temple. One is Kindness. There should be no unkindness manifest in the homes occupied by couples who leave the House of God. [In Jeanette McKay Morrell, *Highlights in the Life of President David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 275; emphasis in original]*

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I think of the peace we feel in the temple. How many of us would love to have that feeling with us constantly? Why does this feeling often leave as we go back to our daily routines? Obviously there are many reasons, but if we would prolong those feelings, perhaps one key would be to increase the constancy of kindness in our lives.

In the incident recorded in Luke 10:25–28, the Savior emphasized the importance of how we treat one another.

A lawyer approached Jesus and asked, “Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus replied with a counterquestion: “What is written in the law? how readest thou?”

The man replied: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.”

The Master responded, “This do, and thou shalt live.”

To a large degree Jesus measures our commitment to Him by how we love and serve each other—by how kindly we behave.

Anciently, one test of the purity of gold was performed with a hard, smooth, black stone referred to as a “touchstone.” Rubbing a metal object across the touchstone left a colored mark. The color of the mark was then matched to a goldsmith’s chart of graded colors. The amount of red in the mark indicated the degree of imperfection in the metal. As the percentage of gold increased, the color of the mark became more yellow. This quick test demonstrated the purity of gold with sufficient accuracy for most purposes.

Today the word *touchstone* is used to refer to a standard by which something is judged or that tests the genuineness or quality of some act. President Howard W. Hunter used this metaphor in speaking of the quality of our discipleship. He said, “The Lord has prepared a touchstone for you and me, an outward measurement of inward discipleship” (“The Lord’s Touchstone,” *Ensign*, November 1986,

34). The Lord’s touchstone for us—our personal, celestial touchstone—is how we love and serve Christ and Heavenly Father, and our treatment of Them is measured by how we treat our brothers and sisters. The Savior said, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). Thus kindness is a test of the quality or genuineness of our character. Each act of kindness leaves a yellow or positive mark on our personal touchstone.

My grandmother, Vera Allen, created such a mark on her celestial touchstone. During the Great Depression she lived in a rural area outside of Dallas, Texas. Homeless and unemployed men looking for work (referred to as “hoboes” in those days) frequently stopped at her home, asking if she had a job they could do or if she could give them a bite to eat. She always managed to find something for them.

On one occasion she asked one such destitute man why so many stopped at her home and not others. The man replied with a question: “You really don’t know?”

After she convinced him she did not know, he led her to the corner of her property and showed her a mark on a tree, put there many months before by a weary traveler. The mark signaled travelers who followed that this was the home of a kind, good-hearted woman who would provide assistance. I know Grandmother had many yellow marks on her touchstone, but to our family the mark on the tree was a special, well-earned honor.

I was fortunate, like many of you, to be raised by parents who practiced kindness both within and outside our home throughout their lives. These acts of kindness provided a secure and comfortable home where I knew I was loved. I remember Mother’s comfort and the times when she listened, understood, expressed confidence, and gave counsel. I remember my father’s patience as he taught his sons to work and how after long hours of work providing for us, Father frequently spent

additional hours in Church and community service. And I cannot forget a father-in-law who continually took produce and other much-needed items to relatives, neighbors, and friends, including a certain young married couple struggling to get through college.

Today, in a world filled with trials, youth and adults alike need refuge from the storms of life. Let us fill our homes with acts of kindness, which will strengthen our families and help prevent Satan's influences from pulling us apart.

We are blessed by examples of latter-day prophets who are kind and gentle leaders. In 1965 evangelist Norman Vincent Peale described then 91-year-old David O. McKay as "a man with a secret," because he radiated so much happiness. Dr. Peale wrote:

What a wonderful thing it would be if there were such a secret, and all of us could discover and use it to make our lives the joyous walk with God that his has been. [Norman Vincent Peale, "David O. McKay: A Man with a Secret," *Instructor*, April 1965, 138; reprinted from *Guideposts*, March 1965, 12]

Dr. Peale searched for President McKay's secret through many interviews with those who knew him and through hours of reading the prophet's words. Near the end of his article, Dr. Peale remarked:

And then one day . . . I found the answer to my question: four lines of a poem by Edwin Markham that President McKay long ago committed to memory as a guide for everyday living.

*There is a destiny, which makes us brothers;
None lives to self alone;
All that we send into the lives of others
Comes back into our own.*

[Peale, "Man with a Secret," 139]

President McKay considered kindness to be essential to the happiness of every human soul. As a young missionary I witnessed such an example in the conduct of President Harold B. Lee. I had the privilege of traveling through my mission with Elder Lee, who at the time was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. During the trip he was suffering with stomach pain from what was thought to be an ulcer. Some individuals might be unpleasant traveling companions with such discomfort, perhaps feeling irritable or complaining, but Elder Lee was not the least bit unpleasant.

One evening, after driving several hours, we stopped for dinner, and a young waitress came to take our orders. Elder Lee, feeling the painful effects of his condition, asked only for a bowl of "milk toast." The young lady replied that he could not have milk toast because it was not on the menu. Elder Lee, in a kindly manner, simply requested two slices of toast and a glass of milk. He then asked if it would be too much trouble to warm the milk. When his meal was served, he politely asked if he might please have an empty bowl. After he received the bowl, he thanked the waitress and proceeded to break the bread into the bowl and pour the warm milk over it. He did not get upset or impatient; he just kindly resolved the situation. I have always been grateful to have observed this mark as it was added to President Lee's touchstone.

The greatest example of all is the kindness displayed by our Heavenly Father and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Whenever I ponder Their goodness, I envision kind, caring, and nurturing parents. I believe our Father constantly acts with love. Constancy is a characteristic of Deity. Man is variable; Father is constant. Could we have faith in our Heavenly Father if He responded to our needs according to a mood? What if our blessings were contingent not on our behavior or on our Father's wisdom but on whether He was having a good or bad day? It would be impossible to develop strong,

unshakable faith in such a being. But God *is* constant. We can go to our Heavenly Father in prayer, trusting that He loves us and that He truly understands our needs far better than we do. We know that He will tutor us, guide us, and bless us in His kindly manner according to His knowledge and wisdom. If we desire to guide our children, bless the life of a spouse, or be worthy of a friend's confidence, we need to display more constant kindness. Then others may have trust in us, similar to the trust and faith we have in our Heavenly Father.

There is much kindness in the world; every day many kind acts leave their marks on personal touchstones. Still, we know that one of our challenges here on earth is to develop god-like constancy in kindness. We must learn to respond consistently to life's ups and downs, acting with love and kindness regardless of challenges that lie in our path.

Perhaps total, complete constancy will not be achieved by anyone in this life. We all have moments when we are impatient and may act unkindly toward a spouse, a child, a co-worker, a friend, or a stranger—days when the red marks on our touchstones reveal imperfections. Constant kindness does require considerable effort. President McKay often quoted James Allen:

A noble and Godlike character is not a thing of favor or chance, but is the natural result of continued effort in right thinking, the effect of long-cherished association with God-like thoughts. [James Allen, *As a Man Thinketh* (Mount Vernon, New York: Peter Pauper Press, 1957), 9]

There never will be too much kindness in the world. People daily experience physical pain, poverty, neglect, illness, crime, natural disasters, conflicts, and struggles of many kinds. And many individuals are suffering from mental and emotional agony, loneliness, depression, discouragement, and other less noticeable infirmities. These are not just

individuals living in faraway places but often members of our own communities and neighborhoods or those living in our own homes. There are thousands every day in need of an act of kindness. Sometimes even a simple word of praise will fulfill this need. In a talk given to the BYU Marriott School of Management, Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

Whether in the work place, around the fireplace, or in community service—we can all do something else which is simple but powerful. Isaiah spoke of providing the “garment of praise.” (Isaiah 61:3.) Of course, there are times in rendering humanitarian service when we need to give an actual, physical cloak, but, most often, those with whom most of us work need material clothing less than the “garment of praise.” [In fireside given on 21 June 1996, in *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory H. Maxwell (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 258]

Although we strive to constantly act with kindness, our individual touchstones will still include red marks reflecting bad decisions, thoughtless remarks, or hasty reactions to both intended and unintended offense. But as we love and nurture each other with kindness, many more yellow marks will appear. As time passes, hopefully the yellow marks of kindness will crowd out the red marks of thoughtlessness.

To develop a habit of kindness, we need to seize every opportunity available. In his book *The Promise of Discipleship*, Elder Maxwell wrote of times when we encounter others who at that very moment are in need of an act of kindness—times when the need for help, whether small or large, is urgent. These moments are character-building opportunities. As Elder Maxwell explained:

Such individualized opportunities may be deflected or rejected by us, of course. Or they may simply go unrecognized. Nevertheless, the moments were there, and they could have been seized “for

[our] good" (D&C 122:7). *Granted, such moments may be fleeting, but they can still be defining, depending upon our responses. . . .*

*. . . For instance, we can decide daily, or in an instant, in seemingly little things, whether we respond with a smile instead of a scowl, or whether we give warm praise instead of exhibiting icy indifference. Each response matters in its small moment. After all, moments are the molecules that make up eternity, affecting not only ourselves but others, because our conduct even in seemingly small things can be contagious. [Neal A. Maxwell, *The Promise of Discipleship* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 71]*

Our capacity to be kind will enlarge as we learn to listen and respond to the promptings of the Spirit. Several years ago, when I lived in North Logan, Utah, I had the wonderful opportunity of serving as a home teacher to a John and Ruth Jenkins, who at the time were well into their retirement years. I learned far more from this wonderful couple than they ever did from me.

Sister Jenkins served faithfully for years after Brother Jenkins passed away. Because of her self-reliance, an attentive family, and caring neighbors, she lived humbly and happily. The time came when she was released from a Church calling and not given a new calling. She was somewhat distraught over "not having a way to serve." She sought counsel from her son. He wisely advised her that she could still provide important and much-needed service to others by seeking the promptings of the Lord as to who, on any particular day, could benefit from her visit.

Sister Jenkins followed her son's counsel. Each morning after rising, she studied her scriptures and then knelt in prayer to seek the inspiration of the Lord as to who might benefit from her help that day. Promptings always came, and acts of kindness followed. Both at her funeral and during months that followed, person after person bore witness of how Sister

Jenkins appeared unexpectedly—in storms of winter or in heat of summer—and provided kind service. Brothers and sisters, I testify that if we learn to be sensitive to the needs of others and if we pray for a discerning spirit, the Lord will lead us to those who need our help, our love, and our acts of kindness. When the promptings come, will we hear? Will we respond? Will additional yellow marks—signifying kind acts—continue to appear on our touchstones?

When we act with kindness we radiate a special warmth and light that is godlike in its origin and nature.

In October 1969, during general conference, President David O. McKay taught:

There is one responsibility that no man can evade. That is the responsibility of personal influence. The effect of your words and acts is tremendous in this world. Every moment of life you are changing to a degree the life of the whole world. Every man has an atmosphere or a radiation that is affecting every person in the world. You cannot escape it. Into the hands of every individual is given a marvelous power for good or for evil. It is simply the constant radiation of what a man really is. Every man by his mere living is radiating positive or negative qualities. Life is a state of radiation. To exist is to be the radiation of our feelings, natures, doubts, schemes, or to be the recipient of those things from somebody else. You cannot escape it. Man cannot escape for one moment the radiation of his character. You will select the qualities that you will permit to be radiated. [CR, October 1969, 87]

Mary Hill Peterson, a teacher of at-risk students in an inner-city junior high school, radiated such qualities. Mary, not a member of our faith, was a special colleague and friend. I observed her classroom often. On each occasion I saw patient acts of kindness, genuine words of commendation, and sincere, honest praise expressed to every one of her students. It was obvious to everyone in the school that

Mary was having a special effect on difficult students. One experience in particular illustrates this effect and her radiating qualities.

Early in the school year Mary was approached after class by one of her students. He was a ninth-grade boy—unkempt in his appearance, failing in school, frequently disciplined for his inappropriate behavior, and probably involved in a local gang.

He spoke to Mrs. Peterson in a rude, disrespectful manner, saying (in more colorful language than I will use): “You’re a phony. No one goes around praising others. People tell you how bad you are and that you do everything wrong. They don’t praise you.”

Mary paused for only a moment and then simply responded, “I know that not everyone compliments others, but a few years ago I decided that I didn’t care what others did. I want to be the kind of person who looks for the good in others, finds it, and then praises them for it.”

The student muttered some inappropriate remarks as he hurriedly left the room.

The significant part of the experience occurred several months later, in the spring. Again approaching his teacher privately after class, the student, this time very politely, remarked, “Mrs. Peterson, I just wanted to tell you that I have decided that I want to be like you.”

I believe that Mary’s work with those high-risk students has produced thousands of positive marks on her touchstone.

As we reflect on both our imperfections and our acts of kindness, we might ask ourselves: Are we sensitive enough to the needs of others? Do we search, or even casually glance around, for opportunities to lighten the

burdens of those weighed down with life’s challenges? Do we brighten the day of those who are discouraged, commend those who are becoming stronger in their struggles, or encourage those who have experienced failure and want to give up just short of success? Are we alert and sensitive enough to even recognize these individuals when they cross our paths? What color are the marks on our touchstones?

I have been the recipient of much kindness. This is a great blessing, which continues daily. I feel deep gratitude for the acts of kindness in my behalf. I must give special thanks to my wife, Janet, who has blessed me with constant kindness for more than 30 years, including kind and helpful assistance in preparing this devotional talk. In terms of kindness, I have a great debt to repay.

Brothers and sisters, I close with a statement from President Howard W. Hunter:

We need to extend the hand of friendship. We need to be kinder, more gentle, more forgiving, and slower to anger. We need to love one another with the pure love of Christ. May this be our course and our desire. [“A More Excellent Way,” Ensign, May 1992, 63]

I pray that we may be more aware of our actions and devote ourselves to achieving constancy in kindness. If our personal touchstones are more fully covered with the yellow marks of kindness, the world will be a better place for all. I testify that this is the will of our Father in Heaven. If we will say, “Thy will be done,” then, as was spoken of President McKay, our lives may be a “joyous walk with God.” In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.