

“On My Honor”

SPENCER W. KIMBALL

My beloved brothers and sisters, I express to you my affection and my love for each of you and I appreciate the love you extend in return. I would like to express thanks to Dr. Lee for that beautiful prayer, and I hope that it can extend to me from all the hearts that are gathered here this morning.

We are delighted to greet you this morning, to welcome you to Brigham Young University, and to wish you well in this exciting new academic year.

This is a wonderful time in your life. As Victor Hugo once wrote: “Youth, even in its sorrows, always has a brilliancy of its own.”

That brilliance always sparkles in the eyes of students on this campus, and that is one of the reasons I love to come to BYU. But of course we *ought* to be happy here. We ought to sparkle and shine and radiate with brilliance. We have everything! When a prominent Eastern man who was visiting our offices asked me, “Why are you, the Mormon people such happy folks?” My answer was: “It is because we have everything—the gospel of Jesus Christ, the light, the priesthood, the power, the promises, the covenants, the temples, our families, the truth.” Latter-day Saints, especially Latter-day Saint youth, surely should have a brilliance of their own. You should have that sparkle here today.

I have entitled my remarks this morning, “On My Honor,” and I intentionally included in my list of things that make us happy our “promises” and our “covenants.” May I concentrate there for just a moment. To do so, I wish to refer to two other greetings you have recently received—one from President Dallin H. Oaks and one from Commissioner Jeffrey R. Holland.

I quote from President Oak’s personal letter to you dated July 6, 1978. It was a most important letter and, having so recently received it, you surely have it still fresh in your minds and in your hearts. It contained a message that must be remembered. It said in part:

We look forward to having you as students at BYU this fall semester.

We are proud of high standards of scholarship, personal conduct, and appearance at Brigham Young University. We hope that all students and their parents will join in our determination to maintain these high standards.

Spencer W. Kimball was President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 12 September 1978.

Each student who enrolls at BYU promises to observe all of the requirements of our Code of Honor, including our dress and grooming standards. We expect each student to keep his or her promise. Please examine the enclosed card and brochure so you will be thoroughly familiar with those requirements. . . . *Sincerely, Dallin H. Oaks* [emphasis added]

And from that brochure to which President Oaks has referred, I quote these remarks from Commissioner Holland:

Those who come to a church college or university within the Church Educational System enter a special environment of scholarship and student activity. That environment uniquely reflects the standards and moral commitments of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and every student makes his or her own contribution to that spirit on the campus. . . .

To facilitate your understanding of our Church Educational System dress and grooming standards, with which you will be expected to comply, this brochure has been prepared for you in advance of your arrival on campus. Your presence will be felt as you honor these commitments. . . .

I wish you well in an educational adventure which will be as important to your spirit as it will be to your mind. May God bless you with a wonderful fact-finding and faith-promoting experience. May he also enable you to bless your own lives as well as the lives of others by following the teaching of his Only Begotten Son who gives each LDS campus its unique light and life. With best wishes, Jeffrey R. Holland [emphasis added]

Those statements by your school administrators reflect the direction they have received from the Church Board of Education and the Brigham Young University Board of Trustees. They did not manufacture these ideas on their own and no amount of “lobbying” will force them to change. In these instructions to you their own loyalty and integrity are at stake,

for they are acting on behalf of the presiding authorities of the Church who direct them. Your loyalty and integrity are at stake in your willingness to abide by that counsel. You have come here “on your honor.” Included in this material received from your school administrators, you may have been a little surprised to find a greeting from me on this same subject. May I repeat that expression of love and interest this morning? It is introduced by a phrase I suggested to your older brothers and sisters (and in some cases maybe your parents) who attended this University more than twenty-five years ago. I suggested then and I suggest again to you this morning that Latter-day Saints should have a “style of their own.”

In that written greeting to you this summer I said:

We can create a style of our own. The world has drifted a long way from the standards of cleanliness of body and soul, but we have such faith in our young people that we are certain that if they are properly advised they will always be well dressed and well groomed and free from the sins of the world. They will thus avoid the pitfalls of the adversary and retain their virtue and worthiness: ‘Forewarned is forearmed.’

One factor contributing to immodesty and a breakdown of moral values is the modern standard of dress and grooming. We must be different. We need not do anything we do not wish to do. We can create our own style and standards. We can influence the patterns among our own people, and we can also help to develop proper community patterns.

Some young people have prided themselves in wearing the most tattered, soiled, and grubby attire. If we dress in a shabby or sloppy manner, we tend to think and act the same way. I am positive that personal grooming and cleanliness, as well as the clothes we wear, can be tremendous factors in the standards we set and follow on the pathway to immortality and eternal life.

It is my understanding that each student who enrolls in this great institution and its sister

Church institutions understands before coming here what the rules and regulations are, and he or she signs the enrollment sheet with a firm promise to obey those rules and regulations. For a young woman to wear short skirts or other immodest wear when she has covenanted otherwise would not be a matter of cleverness in escaping detection but a definite blot on her character. Should any young man promise to observe certain standards of dress or hair length or behavior and then evade those restrictions, certainly his error is deep-seated and is not just a difference of opinion. It is nothing to joke about, but a black mark on his character.

'He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.'

Over the recent Labor Day weekend, President and Sister N. Eldon Tanner and their family had a family reunion up at Bear Lake. There were sixty-one family members present. Sunday evening one of the members in the area came up to President Tanner and asked to shake his hand and say a word to him. She said that earlier in the day she and her husband had been discussing the proper observance of the Sabbath day. They decided to watch the Tanner clan during that day. They saw all the men and boys get ready and go to priesthood meeting in the morning, and the whole group went to Sunday School and later to testimony meeting. She said that after seeing this, her husband remarked, "Well, I think I had better go in the house and put on my suit and tie." You see, my young brothers and sisters, the powerful influence of a good example. At all of the meetings during the day, all sixty-one members of the Tanner family had been well groomed, well dressed, and in their Sunday best.

Please note that I have used the word "covenant" regarding the promises you made when registering at the University. That is a sacred word, and I used it with all of its special spiritual force. I realize that you may not agree fully with our code for dress and behavior. Perhaps you do not agree with it all. You may think it old-fashioned or unnecessary or

bothersome, but the simple fact of the matter is that the code exists under the direction of those responsible for the University and you have promised "on your honor" to abide by that standard.

Please do not misunderstand. We have provided this school so that it may be enjoyed. We are delighted that you are here. We love you and are grateful that of the hundreds of thousands of college-age youth in the Church you are able to attend BYU. But please remember that there is no compulsion for you to come and that you have done so voluntarily. The terms under which you have registered are definite and firm. There is no forum for argument or appeal about the personal standards we expect you to maintain; those have been stated, and you have agreed "on your honor" to abide by them. We have every confidence that you will.

We realize that there are many other universities in the land, some of which are far less stringent about their regulations. It may be that their location, their faculty, their courses, their leadership are more agreeable to you and that you would be happier there—but we hope not. In any case, since you have pledged on your honor to attend this school under the standards we have predetermined, then it would be most untrue of you to accept the Church's heavy financial support of more than two-thirds of your education and then default through unfaithfulness.

If I could not agree with the rules, I would hand back my registration slip and say, "No, thank you. Since I cannot agree and since I do not intend to live the rules, therefore I will not pledge something that I will not do." Or I would say, "I have decided to dress immodestly or wear my hair inappropriately; therefore, I will find a school which does not require me to so pledge. I will not enroll. I will not sign to do one thing and then do another." That is what my integrity would make me say if those were my feelings.

Sister Kimball and I have eaten at many restaurants where it was required of the men to wear a coat and tie. And in those circumstances I say to myself, "If we wish to eat in this restaurant, I will keep my end of the bargain; I will wear a coat and tie." If I were uncomfortable with the rule, I could go to another restaurant where there is no such restriction or I could even go without a meal altogether. But I promise you I would not bolt through the door tieless and demand to be served. Furthermore, and far more seriously, I would not put on a tie at the door, find myself pleasantly and courteously seated, only then tear off my tie and coat and defy the waiter to eject me. Why would I not do such a thing? Because my honor and my dignity and my integrity are more important to me than any meal, however splendid the banquet. If they ask me to wear a tie, I will wear a tie, or refuse—on my honor—to enter.

I invite you to exercise your integrity in the same way on this campus. I assure you that you do not need to wear a tie at the "Cougar-eat." But some things we do require in dress, in dignity, in manners and morals. These have been clearly stated and by these you are honor-bound to abide. Your integrity and my integrity require it.

Obviously, what we say to you here applies to Latter-day Saint students wherever they are, at home and abroad, as well as to our faculty, staff, and administrators. I know one man who nearly moved heaven and earth to get a position on this faculty at BYU, and then—having accepted the position, the salary, the requirements—he began at once fighting the rules, complaining at the salary, and criticizing the leadership of the program and its philosophy. To me he was not only unfair, but he was immoral—and we are opposed to immorality at this school and in its sponsoring institution, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I ask you to keep your promises, to be faithful to your covenants, to live by your standards, and to represent what the sacred tithing dollars

invested in this school must always represent. I ask you to do so "on your honor."

After a message like this, I hope that none of you students hands back your registration slip and that none of the faculty resigns. We want you not only to stay but to love every minute of your experience here. We would like you to feel comfortable about these rules and regulations, these codes of honor, and this discipline. They are part of what we hope to teach at the University. We would like you to see these standards as tools with which you can build a better self. But, of course, they must be respected as tools and care should be exercised so that you do not inflict unnecessary self-injury by abusing yourself against them.

Many of you know the feeling of missing a nail and hitting your thumb with a hammer. Hammers were designed to drive nails, not to damage thumbs. These standards at BYU are designed to build character, to teach discipline, to symbolize propriety and restraint and honor among the students, the faculty, and the institution as a whole. We would hope that you would not spend your time "banging your heads" against these regulations. They were not designed to create dissension or to make you unhappy or angry. Please respect them as you would any tool and use them for their intended purposes. We would be disappointed to think that they would cause you undue difficulty. As the Lord said of the Word of Wisdom, these regulations, too, are "adapted to the capacity of the weak and the weakest of all saints, who are or can be called saints" (D&C 89:3). We believe everyone can live them without anxiety or hardship.

Some of you will recall that in almost every general conference, I have encouraged our Latter-day Saints to mend their fences; to fix up and paint up, or else tear down, their old barns; to trim their hedges; and to repair the garage. In many places throughout the world we have had reports of those who have repaired and repainted, restored and

improved. We are greatly heartened by these responses. As the Lord said, it does indeed “please the eye and . . . gladden the heart” (D&C 59:18).

My father always expected neatness around our farm. As a boy, I had as one of my jobs that of soaping and oiling the harness and hanging up the collars and bridles on the pegs in the harness shop. The surrey had to be washed, greased, and painted regularly—too frequently to suit me. I asked my father, “Why wash the buggy? It’ll just get dirty and dusty again after the first mile or two.” But I made no impression on him and had to do it anyway. And when I painted the buggy, it had to be perfect—no smudges or crooked lines.

I had to whitewash the fence and paint the rose trellis green. Then I had to paint the barn, the granary, and the harness shed. He insisted that everything be neat and clean and in good repair around the house and the farm.

One of the great spiritual uplifts I get in visiting this campus is from its immaculate appearance and beautiful grounds. I commend the groundskeepers, the maintenance crew, and all including the faculty, the staff, the administrators, and the students who share in this pride and make this surely one of the most beautiful campuses in the world. I frequently am visited by people from far and near who have been to the campus here and have nothing but praise. It pleases me to no end.

As I drive down into the valley and see the temple against the hill and this great campus, including the Missionary Training Center, I think of the Lord’s promise to us that “ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid (Matthew 5:14). Surely this campus is in its own way a small city set on the hill which *should not* be hid. It is beautiful—the walks are clean, the windows are shining, the hedges are trimmed, the grass is carefully cut, the walls are not defaced, and care is given to every detail of appearance. Visitors from all over the world come here and comment on its

beauty; and that, of course, makes us very proud. But more important to me than the appearance of our buildings is the appearance of our students and our people—our Latter-day Saints.

By here speaking so directly and emphatically about something like our dress and grooming code, I hope you sense our far more important concern for people’s appearance. Barns and gardens and woodsheds matter, but people matter more. Each person bears a great eternal spirit as well as a God-given body, and the two unite to form the soul of an eternal man or woman. The appearance of that eternal soul with all of its outward manifestations surely takes precedence with us over the important matter of newly painted homes and barns and carefully repaired fences.

As important as they are and as clean as we must keep them, those homes and fences will someday be gone. But you will *never* be gone. You will always matter; and how you appear, what you represent, and with what integrity you keep your covenants will always matter. For all that we believe about gardens and grassland, about painting and barns and cleaning ditches, we say anew and more vigorously to all of you: Trim your hair appropriately. Wear modest, clean clothing. Your clothes do not need to be new and in the latest fashion, but they should be clean, modest, and neat. Be dignified in your outward appearance and in your manners and in your inward morality. Take pride in your principles. Tear down, as it were, any of the old sheds of the past. Repent of old transgressions and start this school year with clean hands and a pure heart, reflected by good grooming, acceptable apparel, and personally integrity.

Let me confess one of the sad disappointments I sometimes feel. I want you to know that it is hard for me to be disappointed, and I rejoice in the blessings of the Lord daily. But a few things disappoint me occasionally and one of them is the returned missionary who, after

two years of taking great pride in how he looks and what he represents, returns to this campus or some similar place to see how quickly he can let his hair grow, how fully he can develop a mustache and long side-burns and push to the very margins of appropriate grooming, how clumsy his shoes can get, how tattered his clothes can be, how close to being grubby he can get without being refused admittance to school. That, my young returned missionary brethren, is one of the great disappointments in my life. I mention it to the missionaries when I see them in their missions, that they should retain their pride and their honor all the rest of their lives, wherever they go.

I meet with prime ministers and presidents, with sovereigns and rulers, with political and public figures all over the world; and one of the things they inevitably say about us (and always with warmth and appreciation) is this: "We have seen your missionaries. We have seen them all over the globe, in every state of the union and in most countries of the world. Without exception, they look like young men ought to look. They are clean cut, neatly dressed, well groomed, and most dignified." My, that makes me proud! I am trying to do my own little part in missionary work, and that kind of comment makes me so very proud of our 26,000 missionaries. Then sometimes these great leaders say, "Your missionaries look like just the kind of young man I would want to take into my business, or into my government, or into my embassy, or into my law firm." Sometimes they even say, "They look just like the young man I would like to have for a son or a son-in-law." That makes me proudest of all.

Please, you returned missionaries and all young men who can understand my concern in this matter, please do not abandon in appearance or principle or habit the great experiences of the mission field, when you were like Alma and the sons of Mosiah, as the very angels of God to the people you met and taught and baptized. We do not expect you to wear a tie

every moment after you get home, or a white shirt and a dark blue suit every day now that you are back in school. But surely it is not too much to ask that your good grooming be maintained, that your personal habits reflect cleanliness and dignity and pride in the principles you taught. We ask you, for the good of the kingdom and for all those who have done and yet do take pride in you, to live both the letter and the spirit of our dress and grooming and conduct codes. In the spirit of your mission commitments, I ask you to do it "on your honor."

There is a story told of President Brigham Young who, having urged the people of certain communities to properly clean and dress their premises, refused to go back to preach to them, saying something like this:

You didn't listen to me last time when I urged you to fix up your premises. The same doors are off their hinges; the same barns are still unpainted; the same fences are partly fallen. I will return when you are ready for the next sermon but you haven't done anything about the first one yet.

Now I do not intend to refuse President Oaks's annual invitation to speak to this delightful audience, but this story does tickle the imagination. I suppose next year at this time I could ask President Oaks to give me a report on hair length and skirt length—if the former is still too long and the latter still too short, I guess by President Young's standards I should not return. And after all, we do know whose name this University bears. Can you see President Oaks frantically trying to trim a young man's mustache or attach sequins and patterns to a girl's pair of faded and worn blue jeans?

Well, I am sure it will not come to that and I would like to be invited to speak again. But even though we smile, it is a very serious matter to me. It *would* be nice to think that Sermon Number One is being lived before we start Sermon Number Two. Let the words of the

Lord linger in your memory as I leave President Young's story with you. "And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46). We sincerely hope every student, faculty and staff member, and administrator will give heed.

Long years ago one great man, Karl G. Maeser, first president of Brigham Young University, wrote this:

*My young friends, I have been asked what I mean by word of honor. I will tell you. Place me behind prison walls—walls of stone ever so high, ever so thick, reaching ever so far into the ground—there is a possibility that in some way or another I may be able to escape; but stand me on the floor and draw a chalk line around me and have me give my word of honor never to cross it. Can I get out of that circle? No, never! I'd die first! [Emerson Roy West, comp., *Vital Quotations*, p. 167]*

Like some of the very sophisticated recording equipment I hear in your rooms, we need not only fidelity at this University, but we need high fidelity. We need great faith on your part, for we live in a time of temptation and opposition. Allegiance to the straight and narrow path of Christ is crucial, and it has implications for you far beyond a dress and grooming code or a stated paragraph of moral behavior. We live in a day when our allegiance is being sorely tested. Satan is succeeding too well in many places, and he succeeds when he entices any person to excuse himself in wrongdoing. Almost all dishonesty owes its existence and growth to that inward distortion we call self-justification. It is the first and worst and most insidious form of cheating: We are cheating ourselves.

When Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus as he fought against the truth, the resurrected Savior made this telling observation. To Paul he said: "It is hard for *thee* to kick against the pricks." Note who is hurt: not the principles, not the truth, not the church, not

even the Christians who were his opposition. Finally, ultimately, it was Paul being hurt. "[This] is hard for thee [,Paul,] to kick against the pricks" (Acts 9:1–5; emphasis added).

In a latter-day revelation the Lord explains that the same thing is true of us whenever we "undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, [or] our vain ambition." Then the "heavens withdraw themselves; and the Spirit of the Lord is grieved." Before we are aware, we, too, are left "to kick against the pricks, to persecute the saints, and to fight against God"; and, like Paul, unless we repent, it will be we who are left damaged and bruised by our failure to conform. It will be hard on any of us when we do battle against the truth (D&C 121: 37–38).

It is a glorious privilege to be attending this, the greatest university in all the world. The other day I had a book handed to me by a very important businessman who was writing his journal, and when he came to a certain place he said, "I went one year to the Brigham Young University, the greatest university in all the world." And he said, "It is a wonderful Church and it has great people in it and great standards." It pleased me very much to know that this man, who was not especially faithful to his activities in the Church, still remembers his years at Brigham Young University. It is a glorious privilege to be attending this, the greatest university in all the world. There is nothing else like it. Have you ever traveled? If you have, take a good look and analyze carefully, and when you take the important points and sum them up, you come out with this final thought: that Brigham Young University is the greatest university in the world. There are universities with larger faculties and more extensive facilities. There are institutions which specialize in more specific areas of the arts and the sciences. But Brigham Young University is designed to enlarge and develop the powers of the spirit, and to educate you for eternity. Here you have the privilege of preparing yourself for life's vocations and at the same time combining

theory and practice in preparation for eternal life. Here you prepare to make a living, but more important still you prepare to live toward perfection, toward exaltation and godhood.

This institution has no justification for its existence unless it builds character, creates and develops faith, and makes men and women of strength and courage, fortitude, and service—men and women who will become stalwarts in the kingdom and bear witness of the Restoration and the divinity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not justified on an academic basis only, for your parents pay taxes to support state institutions, to which you are

eligible, in every state of the Union, and most foreign states also have some opportunities. This institution has been established by a prophet of God for a very specific purpose: to combine strong spiritual and moral values with secular education.

Keep your promises, my young people. Maintain your integrity. Abide by your covenants. Give the Lord, this year and every year, your high fidelity and fullest expression of faith. Do it “on your honor,” and you will be blessed now and forever. God bless you—it is a joy to be with you. Peace be with you, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

On My Honor is a Newbery Honor-winning novel by Marion Dane Bauer, first published in 1986. The book is frequently read in the United States as part of the elementary school curriculum. When Joel is told by his father not to go beyond Starved Rock and to turn back if they get tired, Joel promises, "On my honor." Joel and Tony are best friends despite their different characteristics. Tony, however, changes his mind and goes swimming in the river by Starved Rock. Joel does not want anyone to get hurt. On My Honor is a pop punk band in the vein of bands like Jimmy Eat World, Rufio, Saves the Day, and New Found Glory. Starting in 2007, On My Honor has played over 600 shows in 16 countries, sold thousands of records, and played every venue, basement, community center, and VFW that would have them. Always focusing on musicianship, songwriting, and establishing a like-minded community above all else, the band has worked hard to earn the respect of their peers and music fans alike.