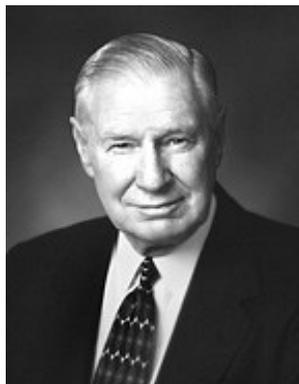

Honesty— a Moral Compass

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My dear brethren, we are all privileged that so many of us in so many countries can be together in this great meeting of the priesthood of the Church. All of us are grateful that our beloved prophet and leader, President Gordon B. Hinckley, is present. We all rejoice that President Hinckley has been able to meet with so many Saints in so many lands since he was called as President of the Church, and he has blessed them greatly. We are grateful for his inspired leadership. I am humbled beyond the power of expression to serve with President Hinckley, President Monson, members of the Quorum of the Twelve, and the other General Authorities of the Church. I have a most profound respect and appreciation for each of them.

Brethren, we all should be concerned about the society in which we live, a society which is like a moral Armageddon. I am concerned about its effect upon us as the holders of the priesthood of God. There are so many in the world who do not seem to know or care about right or wrong. The 13th article of faith is known to all of us. I repeat it for emphasis:

“We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul—We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.”

We all need to know what it means to be honest. Honesty is more than not lying. It is truth telling, truth speaking, truth living, and truth loving. John, a nine-year-old Swiss pioneer child who was in one of the handcart companies, is an example of honesty. His father put a chunk of buffalo meat in the handcart and said it was to be saved for Sunday

dinner. John said, “I was so very hungry and the meat smelled so good to me while pushing at the handcart that I could not resist. I had a little pocket knife. . . . Although I expected a severe whipping when father found it out, I cut off little pieces each day. I would chew them so long that they got white and perfectly tasteless. When father came to get the meat he asked me if I had been cutting off some of it. I said ‘Yes. I was so hungry I could not let it alone.’ Instead of giving me a scolding or whipping, father turned away and wiped tears from his eyes.” 1

I wish to speak to you frankly about being honest. Honesty is a moral compass to guide us in our lives. You young men are under great pressure to learn the technology that is expanding and will continue to expand so rapidly. However, the tremendous push to excel in secular learning sometimes tempts people to compromise that which is more important—their honesty and integrity.

Cheating in school is a form of self-deception. We go to school to learn. We cheat ourselves when we coast on the efforts and scholarship of someone else.

A friend related this experience her husband had while attending medical school. “Getting into medical school is pretty competitive, and the desire to do well and be successful puts a great deal of pressure on the new incoming freshmen. My husband had worked hard on his studies and went to attend his first examination. The honor system was expected behavior at the medical school. The professor passed out the examination and left the room. Within a short time, students started to pull little cheat papers out from under their papers or from their pockets. My husband recalled his heart beginning to pound as he realized it is pretty hard to compete against cheaters. About that time a tall, lanky student stood up in the back of the room and stated: ‘I left my hometown and put my wife and three little babies in an upstairs apartment and worked very hard to get into medical school. And I’ll turn in the first one of you who cheats, and *you better believe it!*’ They believed it. There were many sheepish expressions, and those cheat papers started to disappear as fast as they had appeared. He set a standard for the class which eventually graduated the largest group in the school’s history.” 2

The young, lanky medical student who challenged the cheaters was J Ballard Washburn, who became a respected physician and in later years received special recognition from the Utah Medical Association for his outstanding service as a medical doctor. He also served as a General Authority and is now the president of the Las Vegas Nevada Temple.

In reality, we are only in competition with ourselves. Others can challenge and motivate us, but we must reach down deep into our souls and call forth our God-given intelligence and capabilities. We cannot do this when we depend on the efforts of someone else.

Honesty is a principle, and we have our moral agency to determine how we will apply this principle. We have the agency to make choices, but ultimately we will be accountable for each choice we make. We may deceive others, but there is One we will never deceive. From the Book of Mormon we learn, “The keeper of the gate is the Holy

One of Israel; and he employeth no servant there; and there is none other way save it be by the gate; for he cannot be deceived, for the Lord God is his name.” 3

In the fateful war year of 1942, I was inducted into the United States Army Air Corps. One cold night at Chanute Field, Illinois, I was given all-night guard duty. As I walked around my post, I meditated and pondered the whole miserable, long night through. By morning I had come to some firm conclusions. I was engaged to be married and knew that I could not support my wife on a private’s pay. In a day or two, I filed my application for Officer’s Candidate School. Shortly thereafter, I was summoned before the board of inquiry. My qualifications were few, but I had had two years of college and had finished a mission for the Church in South America.

The questions asked of me at the officers’ board of inquiry took a very surprising turn. Nearly all of them centered upon my beliefs. “Do you smoke?” “Do you drink?” “What do you think of others who smoke and drink?” I had no trouble answering these questions.

“Do you pray?” “Do you believe that an officer should pray?” The officer asking these questions was a hard-bitten career soldier. He did not look like he prayed very often. I pondered. Would I give him offense if I answered how I truly believed? I wanted to be an officer very much so that I would not have to do all-night guard duty and KP and clean latrines, but mostly so my sweetheart and I could afford to be married.

I decided not to equivocate. I admitted that I did pray and that I felt that officers might seek divine guidance as some truly great generals had done. I told them that I thought that officers should be prepared to lead their men in all appropriate activities, if the occasion requires, including prayer.

More interesting questions came. “In times of war, should not the moral code be relaxed? Does not the stress of battle justify men in doing things that they would not do when at home under normal situations?”

I recognized that here was a chance perhaps to make some points and look broad-minded. I suspected that the men who were asking me this question did not live by the standards that I had been taught. The thought flashed through my mind that perhaps I could say that I had my own beliefs, but I did not wish to impose them on others. But there seemed to flash before my mind the faces of the many people to whom I had taught the law of chastity as a missionary. In the end I simply said, “I do not believe there is a double standard of morality.”

I left the hearing resigned to the fact that these hard-bitten officers would not like the answers I had given to their questions and would surely score me very low. A few days later when the scores were posted, to my astonishment I had passed. I was in the first group taken for Officer’s Candidate School! I graduated, became a second lieutenant, married my sweetheart, and we have “lived together happily ever after.”

This was one of the critical crossroads of my life. Not all of the experiences in my life turned out that way or the way I wanted them to, but they have always been strengthening to my faith.

Stealing is all too common throughout the world. For many, their reasoning seems to be, “What can I get away with?” or “It’s OK to do it as long as I don’t get caught!” Stealing takes many forms, including shoplifting; taking cars, stereos, CD players, video games, and other items that belong to someone else; stealing time, money, and merchandise from employers; stealing from the government by the misuse of the taxpayers’ money or making false claims on our **income tax** returns; or borrowing without any intention of repayment. No one has ever gained anything of value by theft. In the play *Othello*, Shakespeare has Iago teach a great truth:

*Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed. 4*

The stealing of anything is unworthy of a priesthood holder.

Any moral dishonesty is inconsistent with exercising the priesthood of God. In fact, the priesthood can only be exercised on the principle of righteousness. 5 When exercised “in any degree of unrighteousness,” it is withdrawn. 6 You just can’t have it both ways. By being dishonest, people only cheat themselves.

There are different shades of truth telling. When we tell little white lies, we become progressively color-blind. It is better to remain silent than to mislead. The degree to which each of us tells the whole truth and nothing but the truth depends on our conscience. David Casstevens of the *Dallas Morning News* tells a story about Frank Szymanski, a Notre Dame center in the 1940s, who had been called as a witness in a civil suit at South Bend, Indiana.

“Are you on the Notre Dame football team this year?” the judge asked.

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“What position?”

“Center, Your Honor.”

“How good a center?”

Szymanski squirmed in his seat, but said firmly, “Sir, I’m the best center Notre Dame has ever had.”

Coach Frank Leahy, who was in the courtroom, was surprised. Szymanski always had been modest and unassuming. So when the proceedings were over, he took Szymanski aside and asked why he had made such a statement. Szymanski blushed. “I hated to do it, Coach,” he said. “But, after all, I *was* under oath.”

This summer the Olympic Games were held in Atlanta, Georgia. Many of the athletes had trained most of their lives to compete. Mere hundredths of a second separated the gold, silver, or bronze medals as well as the possibility of fortunes in commercial endorsements.

Some athletes have been known to cheat by taking prohibited chemicals into their bodies in an effort to temporarily enhance their performance. Whether in sports or in the game of life, we need to achieve honestly, under our own steam, and not on false merit.

I would like to tell you a story of an excellent athlete—a young man with superb character. He never went to the Olympics, but he stands as tall as any Olympian because he was honest with himself and with his God.

The account is told by a coach in a junior high school. He states:

“Today was test day in climbing the rope. We climb from a standing start to a point 15 feet high. [My job is] to train and teach the boys to negotiate this distance in as few seconds as possible.

“The school record for the event is 2.1 seconds. It has stood for three years. Today this record was broken. ...

“For three years Bobby Polacio, a 14 1/2-year-old ninth-grade ... boy, [trained and worked, consumed by his dream] of breaking this record.

“In his first of three attempts, Bobby climbed the rope in 2.1 seconds, tying the record. On the second try the watch stopped at 2.0 seconds flat, a record! But as he descended the rope and the entire class gathered around to check the watch, I knew I must ask Bobby a question. There was a slight doubt in my mind whether or not the board at the 15-foot height had been touched. If he missed, it was so very, very close—not more than a fraction of an inch—and only Bobby knew this answer.

“As he walked toward me, expressionless, I said, ‘Bobby, did you touch?’ If he had said, ‘Yes,’ the record he had dreamed of since he was a skinny seventh-grader and had worked for almost daily would be his, and he knew I would trust his word.

“With the class already cheering him for his performance, the slim, brown-skinned boy shook his head negatively. And in this simple gesture, I witnessed a moment of greatness. ...

“... And it was with effort through a tight throat that I told the class: ‘This boy has not set a record in the rope climb. No, he has set a much finer record for you and everyone to strive for. He has told the truth.’

“I turned to Bobby and said, ‘Bobby, I’m proud of you. You’ve just set a record many athletes never attain. Now, in your last try I want you to jump a few inches higher on the takeoff.’ ...

“After the other boys had finished their next turns, and Bobby came up ... for his try, a strange stillness came over the gymnasium. Fifty boys and one coach [watched] breathlessly [as] Bobby Polacio ... climbed the rope in 1.9 seconds! A school record, a city record, and perhaps close to a national record for a junior high school boy.

“When the bell rang and I walked away, ... I was thinking: ‘Bobby, ... at 14 you are a better man than I. Thank you for climbing so very, very high today.’ ” 7

All of us can climb high when we honor every form of truth. As President Gordon B. Hinckley has said, “Let the truth be taught by example and precept—that to steal is evil, that to cheat is wrong, that to lie is a reproach to anyone who indulges in it.” 8

Holding and exercising the priesthood of God is a marvelous blessing. We are privileged to be part of the unprecedented unrolling of this holy work. We are seeing the remarkable progress of this Church in lands we never dreamed of. Brethren, I am confident the Lord will continue to bless us as we remain honest, faithful, and true to ourselves and to this great cause. The progress of this work is a testimony of its truthfulness, yet each of us can have our own witness through the gift of the Spirit. I have such a witness. That witness permeates the very depths of my soul. May the Lord bless us as we go forth in this holy cause, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Gospel topics: honesty, priesthood, truth, values

Notes

1. In LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion* (1960), 189–90.
2. As related by Janette Hales Beckham.
3. **2 Ne. 9:41.**
4. *Othello*, act 3, scene 3, lines 157–61.
5. See **D&C 121:36.**
6. **D&C 121:37.**

7. In Stanley Miller and others, comps., *Especially for Mormons*, 5 vols. (1972), 1:185–86.

8. “Four Simple Things to Help Our Families and Our Nations,” *Ensign*, Sept. 1996, 7.

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