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General Authority Address

Elder Marvin Ashton

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I'm grateful to be with you tonight and to share in this worthy seminar. And I know that I'm being recorded and it's a little different for me than you have on the back of your brochure that "an independent professional organization which is not sponsored by, nor does it speak for the Church or its leaders." I wanted to put you on notice that I do not have that same freedom. I'm speaking for the Church, and I'm speaking for the leaders.

I commend you for this worthy program you have put together for today. I had wished that I had been able to attend the discussions. As I read the topics that are going to be presented tomorrow, I'm envious that you will be here and some of us will be trying to instruct the Regional Representatives from around the world. I want it to go on record as saying that I endorse your worthy reason for existence. I commend you for uniting in a cause that's worthy and a cause that's just, and uplifting as you associate with each other in a common bond of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I hope that your association will not only endure, but fulfill the dreams and hopes that you have for it.

I've tried to think over the last number of weeks things that are in keeping with the current issues facing Mormon counselors and psychotherapists. Just for a few moments tonight I thought that I would share with you what I think is the greatest challenge that you and I have as we sit here tonight concerned with the profession that we are engaged in. However, I want to digress just long enough to say that we used to have a Welfare Program in the Church. It's been going now for forty years—a great welfare program concerned with the food and clothing needs of the membership of the Church. I hope that you have been impressed the last number of months that the name of the Welfare Program has been changed, and now we talk about Welfare Services which includes, if you please, the supplies and the skills for social and emotional difficulties, as much as it does for food, clothing, and shelter. And this is a great breakthrough for people in your profession. It wasn't too long ago that if someone had an emotional problem in the Church, we felt sorry for them or wondered about them, and then sent them on their way with nothing more tangible than "why don't you wake up or wise up, or get with it." Emotional problems are as real as physical problems and medical problems, and no one knows that more than I do. I'm glad for that experience, and that conviction, and that knowledge. So I just wanted to say in passing that we do not have a Welfare Program in the Church today—we have Welfare Services that include treatment and commodities for the total person. And I'm happy to be a member of the Church, and one of the leaders in the Church that is so concerned about the total individual.

Now, back to the topic—I suppose that the greatest challenge that we have is to teach clients, friends, and families honesty. I think that's the greatest need that we have is to teach honesty—total honesty, and this can best be taught by individuals who are committed to the lofty principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So first, I'd like to say a few words about honesty in our personal lives. The greatest resource, the greatest tool, the greatest weapon that you have is your power to thwart evil and conduct the truth is living an honest life, totally and completely, in your image, in your conduct, and in your daily example. What a disappointment it is to be counseled by someone who is unreal, untrue, and unfaithful.

Just the other day I was visiting with Warden Smith of the Utah State Prison, and he said: "One of the things we have to be constantly reminded of is the fact that we have rules here and then honestly enforce them." And then he said: "If we don't honestly enforce the regulations that are established all hell breaks loose." In prison or outside of prison, honesty is important even for people who do not believe in it. As you go forward as Latter-Day Saints first, and as professional people, counselors and psychotherapists second, the greatest thing you can do is to be honest in your personal lives and not appear to be something that you are not.

How can you know if you're accomplishing this? What are the guidelines? I love this scripture in the Doctrine and Covenants 124:15. I like to read what you have to be and what you have to do to have the Lord love you: "And again, verily I say unto you, blessed is my son Hyrum Smith; blessed is my servant Hyrum Smith, for I the Lord love him because of the integrity of his heart, and because he loveth that which is right before me, saith the Lord." Each time I read that, I'm more impressed with the fact that the Lord loves him because "... he loveth that which is right before me...", not that which is right before his client, or his supervisor, or his associates, but those things that are right before the Lord. What a guideline this should be for all of us.

Number two—honesty in responding and reporting. Are you honest in your counseling? Are you honest with your associates? You might say, if I've told my clients honestly and directly what they should hear, it would kill them. And I will say to you, don't tell them honest things that would kill them. Tell them honest things that will cure them. We have that choice, and we have that training.
Just two examples that honesty in reporting and responding is important. A boy 14 years of age. He said he went into a grove of trees to pray. And they said: “What happened, Joe?” He was just good old Joe in those days, not Joseph Smith, the Prophet. He was just a 14-year-old boy. The reason Joseph Smith’s story, the reason his vision is true—one of the reasons in my mind is because he honestly reported what had happened. Can you imagine anything as shocking as to come out of a grove and say: “I saw God the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ, personages.” That takes honesty to report such a blasphemous thing—that God is separate. Jesus Christ is separate. They appeared to me, and that even though it costs me my life I’m going to be honest in reporting, because that is what I saw. I heard them. They spoke to me. And as the month went on and as things got a little more difficult, some of his friends came to him and said: “Joe, old buddy, you better give it up or it’s going to cost you your life. They’re moving in on you.” And in total honesty, he said: “I don’t care if they take my life. I’ve seen God and I know that I’ve seen God and His Son Jesus Christ, and though they take my life, I will never deny it.” He put honesty in reporting ahead of life. I wish we could have a little bit of that.

I love President Kimball. I had the opportunity of spending seven hours with him today, and his counselors and the other eleven members of the Twelve who are all here for conference. President Kimball is honest. The other day after President Kimball had been ill because of an infection in his ear, he was out of the hospital on Thursday and was visiting with his counselors, and President Tanner said to him: “I don’t think you better go to Canada Saturday. You’re just out of the hospital. Why don’t you listen to us? Sometimes it seems that you don’t listen to us when we try to tell you what to do.” President Kimball turned to him and said: “President Tanner and President Romney, I want you to know that I hear you. What time does the plane leave for Canada?” Totally and completely honest with his associates, with himself, and with his Heavenly Father.

The third item in honesty tonight that I just want to touch upon is honesty in interviewing, honesty in listening. I have a feeling that one of the main reasons that Joseph Smith’s prayer was answered is because he said: “God, whoever you are, whoever you are, I have a problem. I don’t know which church to join.” And he honestly said: “Could you help me.” It was the first time he had ever prayed. “I’m confused. I need answers.” Honesty in interviewing, honesty in his pleas, honesty in the yearnings of his yeart. Why was he prompted to go to a grove of trees? I suppose the only reason that he went there was because it was private, and how important that is in our interviewing and our listening to set the stage, so that we can listen and we can question. “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not, and it should be given him.” I challenge you tonight that if you lack wisdom in your daily life and in your personal lives and in your professional lives that you ask God.

Honesty in interviewing—let me must give you an example of what I think is dishonesty in interviewing. Do we have any bishops here tonight? May I see your hands? Thank you. Do we have some chaplains here? Could I see your hands? Great. How many members of Stake Presidencies do we have here? Thank you. Quite a number. This is what I consider to be dishonest interviewing. Do you keep the Word of Wisdom? As somebody sits across the table and goes like this (nods yes). Do you sustain the General Authorities? (nods yes). Do you love your wife? (nods yes) Are you morally clean? (nods yes). So we conduct an interview, and all someone has to do is sit across the side of the table and nod six or seven times. Some people could say, “Well Elder Ashton, that’s what it says on the interview sheet.” Well of course we want those questions covered, but how much better for a counselor, for a bishop, for a stake presidency member, or for one of you to say: “What does it mean to you to pay a full tithing?” And then listen. You might learn. What does it mean to you to be morally clean? What does it mean to you to sustain the authorities of the Church? And then take the time to listen. I’m doing nothing more than recommending open-end questions that can’t be answered with a nod or a yes or no. I hope I’m not misunderstood. When we interview we should give people an opportunity to honestly respond to honest questions.

Number four, honesty in counseling. We touched upon that. Help others in their goal setting. Give honest encouragement, honest reinforcement, and I say to you tonight: Are you courageous enough to counsel honesty? Share and recommend amounts and portions that are reasonable and possible.

I had the opportunity during the late days in July to go to Sacrament meeting. This is a rarity, because every weekend we go to a stake conference with the exception of a few weeks in July and a few weeks in December. After I attended this Sacrament meeting, I reported to some of my associates what had happened there.

After I reported the happenings, some of my associates said: “Why don’t you write that up so that we can use with any bishops here tonight? May I see your hands? Thank you. Do we have some chaplains here? Could I see your hands? Great. How many members of Stake Presidencies do we have here? Thank you. Quite a number. This is what I consider to be dishonest interviewing. Do you keep the Word of Wisdom? As somebody sits across the table and goes like this (nods yes). Do you sustain the General Authorities? (nods yes). Do you love your wife? (nods yes) Are you morally clean? (nods yes). So we conduct an interview, and all someone has to do is sit across the side of the table and nod six or seven times. Some people could say, “Well Elder Ashton, that’s what it says on the interview sheet.” Well of course we want those questions covered, but how much better for a counselor, for a bishop, for a stake presidency member, or for one of you to say: “What does it mean to you to pay a full tithing?” And then listen. You might learn. What does it mean to you to be morally clean? What does it mean to you to sustain the authorities of the Church? And then take the time to listen. I’m doing nothing more than recommending open-end questions that can’t be answered with a nod or a yes or no. I hope I’m not misunderstood. When we interview we should give people an opportunity to honestly respond to honest questions.

After I reported the happenings, some of my associates said: “Why don’t you write that up so that we can use it in one of the Church magazines.” And so I wrote it up. I entitled the report: “After Six Years”. It has to do with this point about honesty and counseling. I sat in the meeting with Sister Ashton and a member of the bishopric stood up and he introduced me in this peculiar and lengthy way. “Brothers and sisters, Elder Ashton is going to be disappointed in what I say now, because once I heard him say at the Utah State Prison to a group of prisoners, when you’re released and go back into society, don’t brag about being an ex-convict. Just go on from where you are.” He paused and he then said: “You people in the congregation tonight don’t know it, but I’m an ex-convict from the Utah State Prison. About six years ago when I first met Elder Ashton, he was in charge of the program at the prison. After I
became better acquainted with Elder Ashton on the second visit. I told him I was a pretty fair runner. I said to him, I wonder if you can arrange to get me out of prison so that I can run in the competition for the 24th of July Twenty-Five Mile Deseret News Marathon Race. Elder Ashton said to me, ‘I’ll see what I can do.’ So Elder Ashton went to the warden and said, would you let XYZ out of prison?” (I have to say XYZ, because I’m going to say a little bit about confidences in a minute.) “Elder Ashton told me later that the warden said that you can have him out of prison for the marathon if you will guarantee that he won’t run away. Elder Ashton took the responsibility for that. I was out of prison for a day, and I went up to the top of Immigration Canyon and started the race with three or four hundred others. I wanted to run but I wasn’t in too good of shape because the only place I had to train was on free time running around the prison yard. But after I’d run about half the distance my legs were aching, my body was sore, there were blisters all over the soles of my feet. And I just felt that I couldn’t go on any longer. I felt like I was entitled to quit. All of a sudden a thought came to my mind, ‘you can’t let Elder Ashton down, can you?’ You’d better keep going.’ And with that impression, I ran the rest of the way and I made it to Liberty Park.

After the race was over, Elder Ashton told me that he was proud of me. He was happy to have me for a friend. For one of the few times of my life I want you to know that I was proud of myself, too. It’s the first thing I’d ever done in my life that I started and finished. I went back to the prison that day and about six months later I was released from the prison. Two or three months after that I found a lovely young lady and about eight months later, we went to the Temple with Elder Ashton and he sealed my wife and me for time and all eternity in the temple. Now I’m a member of your bishopric.” And his chin quivered and he said, “Now Elder Ashton will speak with you.”

I just share that with you to let you know that if you’re going to be honest with people in counseling, you have to become part of their lives. I suppose the bridge, the handle upon which this man and I could grasp and move forward together was the fact that both he and I like to run. and from that we’ve made a good friendship.

Number five. Honesty in keeping confidences! I wish that you could teach us as members of the Church the importance of keeping confidences and trust. Teach us this great value. Set the example for us. Help us to realize that loose words or loose comments are character assassination tools. Oh, that we could redeem those people who have been hurt because some people haven’t had the judgement and the wisdom to maintain a confidence. Trust with ourselves, trust with our members, trust with our wives and our husbands and our children. It certainly is greater to be trusted than to be loved. It’s a great compliment to be trusted, but what a responsibility.

Finally, confidence in facing current issues. Be honest enough to be up to date. Avoid the tendency and convenience of working with yesterday. I don’t know how often it crossed your mind, but we have a gentleman 82 years of age, president of the greatest organization in the world, and Eldon Tanner, 79 years of age. A week ago Marion G. Romney was 80. What’s that—about an 81-year average for a presidency? Eighty-one? Why do I mention this? They are successful because they are honest in facing current issues. They are up to date. Spencer W. Kimball isn’t living in 1943. He tells us to lengthen and quicken our stride and every time we do he gets that much further ahead of us. I think it’s a great virtue to face current issues in an honest way. Keep up to date with truth. Keep up to date with God. Honesty with self makes all of this possible.

I leave you my blessings, I bear you my witness that Jesus is the Christ, and the conference that we are going to hold Saturday and Sunday is not anything but a conference of the Church of Jesus Christ! It’s His Church, it’s His kingdom. That’s a reality. It’s not the church of Spencer W. Kimball, or David O. McKay. It’s the Church of Jesus Christ. I was pleased to hear that Brother Bergin this morning had for this theme, “We Have The Truth.” Let’s not be ashamed or hesitant in sharing that. With all honesty of my heart and soul I bear special witness to you that Jesus is the Christ and that He lives, that He’s aware of His kingdom, that He wants us to be honest with ourselves and honest with our associates and honest with Him.

These thoughts I leave you humbly and in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.