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Does Christ come first in our lives?

Good evening, brethren. It's a pleasure to be with you tonight. A few weeks ago in a testimony meeting with General Authorities, President Gordon B. Hinckley made this observation: "It is easy to be a Mormon and accept the theology. It is difficult to be a Christian and follow Christ in word and deed."

President Hinckley's challenging words came with renewed force to my mind later when I was reading a book by Michael H. Hart entitled *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*. To my surprise and disappointment, Mr. Hart ranks Jesus Christ third on his list of people who have had the greatest effect on the course of human history. The author's reason for placing Jesus third in importance is as follows:

"The impact of Jesus on human history is so obvious and so enormous that few people would question his placement near the top of the list. Indeed, the more likely question is why Jesus . . . has not been placed first."

The author acknowledges that the teachings of Jesus Christ are "surely among the most remarkable and original ethical ideas ever presented. If they were widely followed, I would have had no hesitation in placing Jesus first in this book" ([New York City: Hart Publishing Co., 1978], pp. 47, 50).

What a searing and likely very true observation: If Jesus' teachings were widely followed, Mr. Hart would have no hesitation in placing Jesus first!

With these thoughts in mind, I feel it is appropriate for us to ask, "Where do we rank Jesus Christ in our lives?" Does He come first, as He should? Perhaps a more significant question would be, "Where would we rank ourselves as *followers* of Jesus' teachings?" Do we live as Christians in word and deed?

This is especially important for us because as bearers of the priesthood we have had bestowed upon us authority and power to officially act in the name of Jesus Christ. We have the sacred obligation and privilege to bear His name with dignity. Of all men on the earth, we are to keep His influence foremost in our lives, to bring a consistency in what we preach and in our conduct. As we do so, we will become converted and strengthen each other, and His teachings and all that His life represents will have their rightful influence and honor among mankind.

Followers of Christ help a family

One morning several years ago I was driving with my family to Disney World in Florida. Our four young daughters were excited as we approached the turnoff to that famous park. The laughter and happy chatter stopped suddenly, however, as our rented station wagon sputtered and chugged to an unexpected stop on the exit ramp. Many cars sped by us in the rush-hour traffic as I tried unsuccessfully to get the car running again. Finally, realizing there was nothing more we could do, we got out of the stalled car and huddled together off the road for a word of prayer.

As we looked up from our prayer, we saw a smiling, handsome man and his son maneuver their bright red sports car through the lanes of traffic and pull off the road beside us. For the remainder of the morning and into the afternoon, these men assisted us and cared for our needs in many kind and helpful ways. They took us and our belongings to the receiving area at the park. In their small car, it took several trips. They helped me locate a tow truck for the stranded car; they drove me to the rental agency to get a replacement vehicle. Then, because there

was some delay, they drove back to where my family waited to let them know where I was. They bought refreshments for them and then waited with my family until I returned several hours later.

We felt that these men were truly an answer to our prayer, and we told them so as we said good-bye and tried to thank them. The father responded, "Every morning I tell the good Lord that if there is anyone in need of my help today, please guide me to them."

We ranked those men very high as followers of Christ that day. Their influence remains with us still. There have been many days since then and possibly equally as many other people uplifted and influenced by daily acts of Christian kindness of that father and his son.

Everyday acts of Christian service

Acts of Christian service should be part of our everyday agenda. In the book of Acts, chapter 10, verse 38, it is said of Jesus that He "went about doing good." Jesus taught us how to do good: love our neighbors; forgive others; care for the poor, the needy, the afflicted, the lonely. It is inspiring to see that the Lord has organized His Church to also do these same things—to care for the needs of others through various assignments.

These planned acts of service generated through Church programs are important and commendable. They are the mark of a Christian people. The Church has a function in service and renders assistance that cannot be provided by individuals alone. These opportunities of the Church as an institution, however, cannot fulfill the responsibility you and I have for personal acts of Christlike kindness. These lift our soul and renew our relationship with our Heavenly Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ.

President Spencer W. Kimball said, "The major strides which must be made by the Church will follow upon the major strides to be made by . . . individuals" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1979, p. 114; or *Ensign*, May 1979, p. 82).

Perhaps the greatest of Christian acts are those we never hear about. They are deeds done quietly, spontaneously, anonymously, without expectation of recognition or compensation. Christian acts begin with Christlike thoughts in our hearts. Then Christ's teachings and His characteristics will be reflected naturally in our actions. Soon there will be more friendly smiles, more kindly words, more courteous responses from us—all seemingly small, insignificant acts, yet they can have a great impact in all our lives. President Rex Lee of BYU has said, "Christlike niceness is . . . the cornerstone of [Christ's] teachings" (address given at a Brigham Young University devotional, 10 Sept. 1991).

A junior-high-age youth hurried home from school one day with steps lighter and quicker than usual, rushed into the house, and called, "Guess what? Someone said hi to me today!"

If a smile or a hello or simple kindness can bring happiness and joy into someone's life, how great is our potential to brighten this world with the influence of "Christlike niceness."

I know a young priest, Jason, who faithfully and quietly attends to his aging grandmother's needs. He stops by her home regularly to care for her yard, wash windows, or run errands. Sometimes he'll prepare something for her to eat if he sees she hasn't been eating enough that day. One Saturday when she wasn't feeling well, he took his friend to play Monopoly at her home so she wouldn't be alone.

Young men and brethren, honoring womanhood is also part of following Christ. His show of understanding toward Mary and Martha, his respect and concern for his mother and the honor bestowed on her demonstrate that Christian men are to be considerate, honest, courteous, caring toward women. The designation "a Christian gentleman" should be a desired title of every man—young or old—who bears the priesthood.

Following Christ requires sacrifice

Niceness and kindness represent one level of Christlike service, but there are other levels. Sometimes we are asked to give more than we feel we are capable of giving or more than we really want to give. We may feel burdened with expectations and responsibilities. It is then we learn that following Christ also requires sacrifice, commitment, and courage.

The father of a young family who was asked to serve as a mission president gathered his children around him. He explained to them that the prophet had emphasized that the call was a call to the entire family. He asked each of the children if they would be willing to leave their new home, their friends, their school and go three years to an unknown place in the mission field. In that tender moment, each child agreed to willingly support this call to serve.

Several days later, the father, sensing that his fourteen-year-old son was unusually solemn and quiet, sat down with him to ask what was on his mind. The boy confided that he was worried about having to quit school at such a young age to serve as a full-time missionary. He didn't know if he was ready to wear a suit and tie every day. He said, "I kinda wanted to be a boy a little longer." Of course, the son had misunderstood. These duties were not expected of a young man his age. Yet

he had been willing to do them if that was what the Lord required.

What would Jesus have me do?

Knowing what the Lord requires of us and also having the desire to follow Him doesn't always assure that it will be easy. I believe it would help to ask the questions my best friend always asks when faced with a difficult decision or challenge: "What would the Lord have me do? Would I do it for the Lord?"

A young woman I know felt saddened and frustrated because a friend had made unkind, untrue remarks about her. It distressed her that those who heard the false accusations would believe them. She wanted others to know the truth, and she wanted her friend to realize how much hurt her words had caused. The young woman thought of ways to confront her friend in an effort to have the truth known. The situation weighed heavily upon her until finally she thought, "What would Jesus do?" She decided that Jesus would show love toward her friend. And that is just what this young woman did.

Once she let the teachings of Jesus influence her decision and guide her actions, that which bothered her seemed not to matter. She didn't have to worry about it anymore. She said that she felt a big burden was lifted from her. What had been hard to endure became easier to resolve when a Christian attitude of forgiveness was taken.

When we place Jesus first in our lives, He will guide our decisions and give us the strength to avoid temptations. One day I received a phone call from my grandson Joel, who will soon be a deacon. He was having a difficult time making a decision. He had been invited to go with a group of students from his school to Sea Camp in San

Diego, California. It sounded very exciting to a young boy! There would be behind-the-scene experiences at Sea World—watching the trainers and helping to feed the sea animals. His dilemma was that the camp would be on a weekend, with scuba diving and beach exploring on Sunday.

His parents had discouraged him in going but had allowed him to make his own choice, believing he would choose what was right. He had assured them that although he couldn't attend church on Sunday, he would not swim. He said, "I can sit on the beach and be surrounded by God's creations. Heavenly Father couldn't feel bad about that, could He?"

Joel wanted to know what Grandpa Rex thought he should do. I answered with the question, "Joel, what do you think Jesus would want you to do?" His voice was a little choked up as he answered, "Grandpa, I don't think He would be very happy with me if I do that on Sunday. Do you?"

It hadn't been an easy decision to make, but it was the right one. We all have many difficult choices to make each day. There are many enticements that, if followed, will lead us away from Christ. The movies and videos we choose to watch, the entertainment we seek, the music we listen to, the styles we wear, and the language we speak are all influenced by the strength of our desire to follow Christ. In making these decisions, we may feel it is too hard to be left out or to miss out on what the world thinks is okay. Yes, "it is difficult to be a Christian and follow Christ in word and deed." When we do follow Him, however, we will feel the peace and assurance that come from making right choices. He will provide the courage necessary for those times when we have to stand alone.

Moroni was a true Christian

In the Book of Mormon Alma records the powerful account of Moroni, chief commander of all the armies of the Nephites. It is the account of one who stood alone and of the force for good he became. With his armor girded about him, his headplate, breastplate, and his shields fastened upon him, his banner of liberty raised on a pole above him, he "bowed himself to the earth, and he prayed mightily unto his God for the blessings of liberty to rest upon his brethren, so long as there should a band of Christians remain to possess the land—

"For thus were all the true believers of Christ, who belonged to the church of God, called by those who did not belong to the church."

Alma continues: "And those who did belong to the church were faithful; yea, all those who were true believers in Christ took upon them, gladly, the name of Christ, or Christians as they were called, because of their belief in Christ who should come.

"And therefore, at this time, Moroni prayed that the cause of Christians . . . might be favored" (Alma 46:13–16).

I pray that we, who have taken upon us His name and His marvelous priesthood authority and power, may also gladly take upon us the commitment to rank Jesus Christ first in our thoughts and also in our deeds, that we will find "the Spirit of the Lord . . . has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2). This will enable us to rank ourselves as true followers of Jesus—as true Christians. Such actions will provide us and those we serve with spiritual strength to endure. That we may do this, and find the happiness and peace that lightens burdens and makes following Him easier, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.