



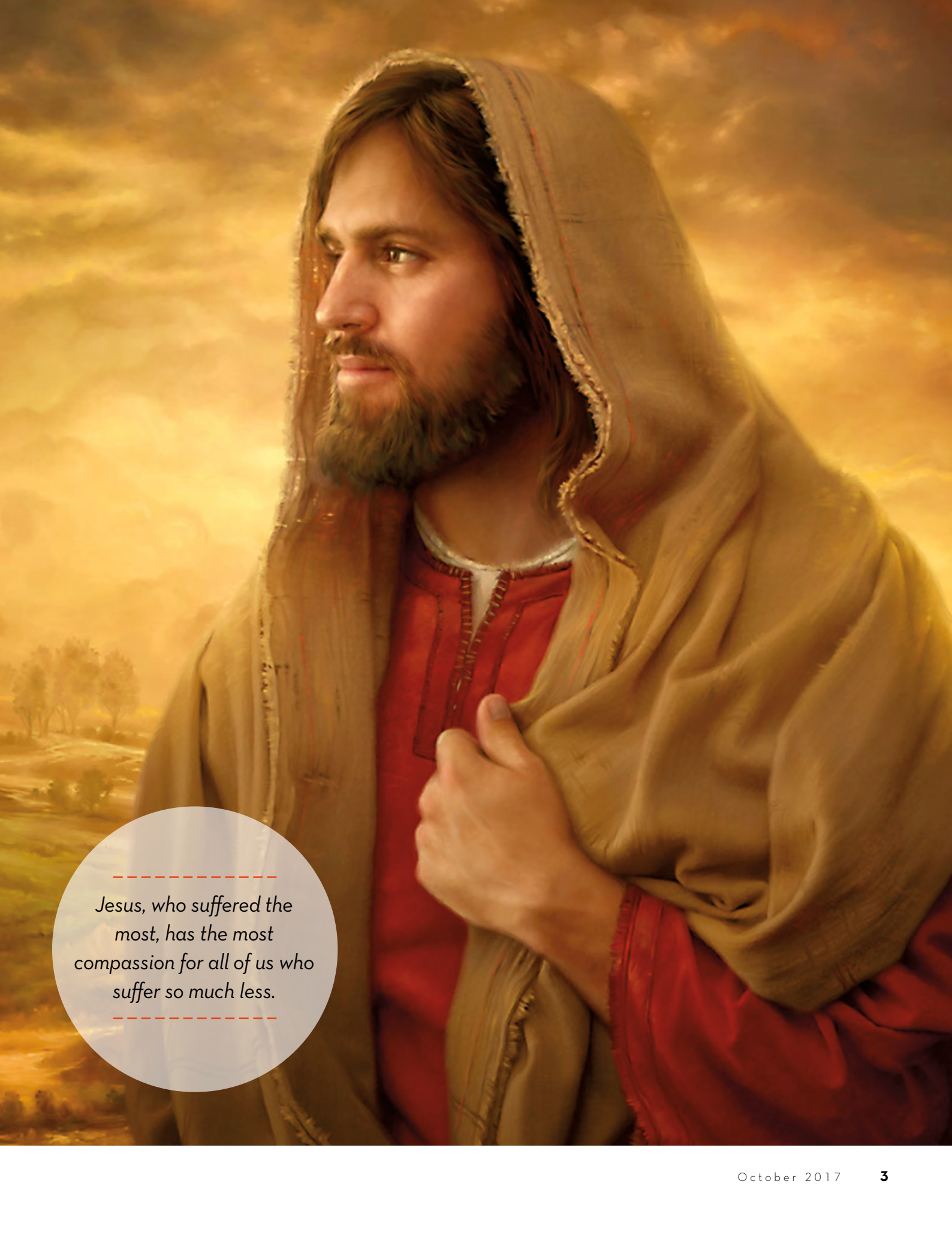
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A Christlike CHARACTER

Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) taught a principle that has impressed me deeply and been the focus for much of my studying, reflecting, and pondering. He said, “There could have been no Atonement without the character of Christ!”¹ Since hearing this straightforward and penetrating statement, I have tried to learn more about and better understand the word “character.” I have also pondered the relationship between Christ’s character and His Atonement—and the implications of that relationship for each of us as disciples.

THE CHARACTER OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

Perhaps the greatest indicator of character is the capacity to recognize and appropriately respond to other people who are experiencing the very challenge or adversity that is most immediately and forcefully pressing upon us. Character is revealed, for example, in the power to discern the suffering of other people when we ourselves are suffering; in the ability to detect the hunger of others when we are hungry; and in the power to reach out and extend compassion for the spiritual agony of others when we are in the midst of our own spiritual distress. Thus, character is demonstrated by looking and reaching outward when the natural and instinctive response is to be self-absorbed and turn inward. If such a capacity is indeed the ultimate criterion of moral character, then the Savior of the world is the perfect example of such a consistent and charitable character.



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believe on me through their word;

“That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me. . . .

“ . . . That they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me. . . .

“And I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:20, 21, 23, 26).

I find myself repeatedly asking the following questions as I ponder this and other events that took place so close to His betrayal and His suffering in the garden: How could He pray for the well-being and unity of others immediately before His own anguish? What enabled Him to seek comfort and peace for those whose need was so much less than His? As the fallen nature of the world He created pressed in upon Him, how could He focus so totally and so exclusively upon the conditions and concerns of others? How was the Master able to reach outward when a lesser being would have turned inward? A statement from Elder Maxwell provides the answer to each of these powerful questions:

EXAMPLES OF CHRIST'S CHARACTER

In the upper room on the night of the Last Supper, the very night during which He would experience the greatest suffering that ever took place in all of the worlds created by Him, Christ spoke about the Comforter and peace:

“These things have I spoken unto you, being yet present with you.

“But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:25–27).

Recognizing that He Himself was about to intensely and personally experience the absence of both comfort and peace, and in a moment when His heart was perhaps troubled and afraid, the Master reached outward and offered to others the very blessings that could and would have strengthened Him.

In the great Intercessory Prayer, offered immediately before Jesus went forth with His disciples over the brook Cedron to the Garden of Gethsemane, the Master prayed for His disciples and for all “which shall

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“Jesus’ character necessarily underwrote His remarkable atonement. Without Jesus’ sublime character there could have been no sublime atonement! His character is such that He ‘[suffered] temptations of every kind’ (Alma 7:11), yet He gave temptations ‘no heed’ (D&C 20:22).”²

Jesus, who suffered the most, has the most compassion for all of us who suffer so much less. Indeed, the depth of suffering and compassion is intimately linked to the depth of love felt by the ministering one.



ACTIVELY SEEKING CHARITY

We can in mortality seek to be blessed with and develop essential elements of a Christlike character. Indeed, it is possible for us as mortals to strive in righteousness to receive the spiritual gifts associated with the capacity to reach outward and appropriately respond to other people who are experiencing the very challenge or adversity that is most immediately and forcefully pressing upon us. We cannot obtain such a capacity through sheer willpower or personal determination. Rather, we are dependent upon and in need of “the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah” (2 Nephi 2:8). But “line upon line, precept upon precept” (2 Nephi 28:30) and “in [the] process of time” (Moses 7:21), we are enabled to reach outward when the natural tendency is for us to turn inward.

Let me suggest that you and I must be praying, yearning, striving, and working to cultivate a Christlike character if we hope to receive the spiritual gift of charity—the pure love of Christ. Charity is not a trait or characteristic we acquire exclusively through our own purposive persistence and determination. Indeed we must honor our covenants and live worthily and do all that we can do to qualify for the gift; but ultimately the gift of charity possesses us—we do not possess it (see Moroni 7:47). The Lord determines if and when we receive all spiritual gifts, but we must do all in our power to desire, yearn, invite, and qualify for such gifts. As we increasingly act in a manner congruent with the character of Christ, then perhaps we are indicating to heaven in a most powerful manner our desire for the

supernal spiritual gift of charity. And clearly we are being blessed with this marvelous gift as we increasingly reach outward when the natural man or woman in us would typically turn inward.

Jesus is the Christ, the Only Begotten Son of the Eternal Father. I know that He lives. And I testify that His character made possible for us the opportunities for both immortality and eternal life. May we reach outward when the natural tendency for us is to turn inward. **NE**

From a Brigham Young University–Idaho Religion Symposium address given on January 25, 2003.

NOTES

1. Neal A. Maxwell, “The Holy Ghost: Glorifying Christ,” *Ensign*, July 2002, 58.
2. Neal A. Maxwell, “O How Great the Plan of Our God!” (address to Church Educational System religious educators, Feb. 3, 1995), 6, si.lds.org.