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## The Book of Mormon — A Guide to Religious Living: VI. Things to Repent Of

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# *The Book of Mormon — A Guide to Religious Living*

LOWELL L. BENNION

## VI. THINGS TO REPENT OF

**I**N a farewell message to his people and to all men, First Nephi writes with deep feeling about the things closest to his heart which motivated his keeping the Nephite record. He tells us what the Book of Mormon aims to teach us.

Among other purposes, “. . . it speaketh harshly against sin, according to the plainness of the truth.” Whenever prophets have spoken, interpreting the will of God to men, they have found it urgent to speak of men’s sins. In bold language they have enumerated the evils of men. Nephi and his successors in the prophetic calling ran true to form. They had much to write about. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, their review of the shortcomings of this ancient people is instructive. What were the sins of the Nephites? How could they have been so persistently blind to them? What was the prophetic standard of the right? What of repentance?

### *Slow to Remember the Lord*

The underlying evil among the Nephites, one which seems to have been the basic cause of all others, was their love of self instead of their love of God. Love of self led to

pride, vanity, selfishness, lust, cruelty, and even murder. Their whole perspective was distorted and their sense of values false, because their view of life was so egocentric.

The truth of the Savior’s statement, “He that would save his life shall lose it, and he that will lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall find it,” is verified in Book of Mormon history. Whenever Nephites lived for God, they achieved happiness and peace; whenever they forgot their Maker and sought the satisfactions of their own selfish desires, they brought upon themselves confusion and strife. Preoccupation with self as an end does not bring personal happiness. The self can only enjoy full expression, when it is completely devoted to something higher than itself. Self-concern divides and weakens the self; self-giving makes one whole and thus strengthens the self.

The love of God and his righteousness makes for self-realization. This is His world. He understands its laws. To follow His will is to fit ourselves into a larger whole, to live in harmony with the whole universe of which we are only a

part. Should man expect nature, fellowmen, and Deity to conform their ways to his? Is it not "wisdom's path" for man to conform his life to the larger world of the Creator? The Book of Mormon answer to this question is interestingly stated.

" . . . O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish." (II Nephi 9:28.)

King Noah's wickedness and its accompanying evil consequences were ascribed to the fact that ". . . he did not keep the commandments of God, but *He did walk after the desires of his own heart.*"

Nephi, son of Helaman, in a passionate lamentation, describes man's neglect of his Maker. Man is even less than the dust of the earth, ". . . the dust of the earth moveth hither and thither, . . . at the command of our great and everlasting God." (Helaman 12:7.)

"O how foolish, and how vain, and how evil, and devilish, and how quick to do iniquity, and how slow to do good, are the children of men; . . . and how slow are they to remember the Lord their God, and to give ear unto his counsels, yea, how slow to walk in wisdom's paths!

"Behold, they do not desire that the Lord their God, who hath created them, shall rule and reign over them; notwithstanding his great

goodness and his mercy towards them; they do set at naught his counsels, and they will not that he should be their guide." (Helaman 12:4-6.)

Mormon describes the depths to which the Nephites had fallen near the end of their history— ". . . thou knowest that they are without principle, and past feeling; and their wickedness doth exceed that of the Lamanites." (Moroni 9:20; read the entire chapter.)

"Wherefore, brethren," writes Jacob, "seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand. For behold, ye yourselves know that he counseleth in wisdom, and in justice, and in great mercy, over all his works." (Jacob 4:10.) This is the wisdom of life recommended repeatedly in the Nephite record. Lesser and specific sins are an outgrowth of this basic evil of forgetting the Creator and his purposes in creation. Let us review some of the evils and sins of the Nephites.

#### *Some Specific Sins*

*Pride.* Chief among Nephite sins was pride, a pride nourished by learning, prosperity, and riches.

"But wo unto the rich, who are rich as to the things of the world. For because they are rich they despise the poor, and they persecute the meek, and their hearts are upon their treasures; wherefore, their treasure is their God. And behold, their treasure shall perish with them also." (II Nephi 9:30; read also Jacob 2:11-21 and Alma 5:27-30, 37.)

Pride is associated with a multitude of other evils mentioned in the Nephite record—with stubbornness of heart, covetousness, envy, vanity, with a love of “that which hath no life” and with the neglect of those things which we should love.

“For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted.” (See Mormon 8:37.)

“. . . O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned, they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish.

*“But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God.”* (II Nephi 9:28, 29.)

Nephi does not specify any particular type of learning. Doubtless, he is condemning the lack of humility in all walks of life—even in religion and in every-day life.

*Whoredoms.* Jacob condemns lustful living as an even greater evil than pride. It can have no justification, not even when practiced by a David or Solomon. (See Jacob 2:22-35 and 3.)

“For I, the Lord God, delight in the chastity of women. And whoredoms are an abomination before me; . . .”

“Behold, ye have done greater iniquities than the Lamanites, our

brethren. Ye have broken the hearts of your tender wives, and lost the confidence of your children, because of your bad examples before them; and the sobbings of their hearts ascend up to God against you . . .” (Jacob 2:28, 35.)

“O all ye that are pure in heart, lift up your heads and receive the pleasing word of God, and feast upon his love; for ye may, if your minds are firm, forever.

“But, wo, wo, unto you that are not pure in heart, that are filthy this day before God; . . .” (Jacob 3:2, 3.)

Purity of heart is achieved by living for things above self—by holding the lives of others sacred, by loving God, by creative achievement in wholesome endeavor.

*The Law of Moses.* The Nephites were taught the law of Moses and encouraged to live its moral teachings. Lying, stealing, covetousness, and murder were, therefore, condemned. Unlike some of their Israelitish brothers in Canaan, Nephite teachers seem not to have made the law an end in itself, nor did they become lost in the “lesser matters of the law.” They were not pedantic like the scribes and pharisees whom Jesus exposed (Matthew 23).

Nephite writers remembered the weightier matters of the law—“judgment, mercy, and faith.” Their emphasis was not on personal piety so much as it was on social righteousness. In these things, their message is in harmony with that of Jesus and the prophets of Israel.

Though they lived under the law

of Moses, their minds were on Christ. So the prophet, Abinadi, could say, "Therefore, if ye teach the law of Moses, also teach that it is a shadow of those things which are to come." (Mosiah 16:14.)

"And, notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the law of Moses, and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ, until the law shall be fulfilled." (II Nephi 25:24.)

### *Why Men Sin*

Sin is man's conscious, willful failure to do that which in his heart and mind he knows he should do. Great evil comes to us through our ignorance. This is understandable and forgivable, except where ignorance is inexcusable. But why do we humans repeatedly act against our knowledge and judgment?

Man was surely made to be one and not a duplex nor a multitude. He is constantly striving to build and maintain a sense of oneness and wholeness in his inner life. To paraphrase the scripture, "a mind divided against itself, cannot stand." Sin divides the conscious life of man; it pits him against himself. Why then does he persist in undermining the very thing he is trying to establish—the integrity of his mind?

William James, one of America's most creative thinkers, explained the technique by which man does things he knows he should not do. It is a process of rationalization or self-deception. When a person desires to do something contrary to his better judgment, he does not ad-

mit his departure from the right. Instead, he rationalizes; he colors the thing he is doing to make it appear right. He finds, in short, an excuse. He deceives himself long enough to follow his own desire, to accomplish his own purpose despite his better judgment. Books have been written in recent decades by psychologists and moralists on this art of self-deception.

Book of Mormon writers must have been rather astute observers of human nature, for long ago they detected this universal tendency of man to blind himself to the truth in order to accomplish his own ends without losing face with himself—until the deed is done.

Nephi, looking forward to a later day, perhaps our very day, describes this process of self-deception:

"And there shall also be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify in committing a little sin; yea, lie a little, take the advantage of one because of his words, dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this; and do all these things, for tomorrow we die; and if it so be that we are guilty, God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God.

"Yea, and there shall be many which shall teach after this manner, false and vain and foolish doctrines, and shall be puffed up in their hearts, and shall seek deep to hide their counsels from the Lord; and their works shall be in the dark." (II Nephi 28:8, 9.)

There is even a bit of humor in Nephi's description of how the evil one—through this technique of self-deception—leads us "*carefully* down to hell."

"And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell." (II Nephi 28:21.)

Samuel, the Lamanite prophet, also calls the attention of the Nephites to another trick of self-deceit—that of evading responsibility and truth in the present, by referring to that which one would have done in another circumstance.

"And now when ye talk, ye say: If our days had been in the days of our fathers of old, we would not have slain the prophets; we would not have stoned them, and cast them out.

"Behold ye are worse than they; for as the Lord liveth, if a prophet come among you and declareth unto you the word of the Lord, which testifieth of your sins and iniquities, ye are angry with him, and cast him out and seek all manner of ways to destroy him; yea, you will say that he is a false prophet, and that he is a sinner, and of the devil, because he testifieth that your deeds are evil." (Helaman 13:25, 26; read also verses 27-29.)

Moroni also foresees our habit of rationalization when he writes:

"Yea, it shall come in a day when there shall be great pollutions upon the face of the earth; there shall

be murders, and robbing, and lying, and deceivings, and whoredoms, and all manner of abominations; when there shall be many who will say, Do this, or do that, and it mattereth not, for the Lord will uphold such at the last day. But wo unto such, for they are in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity." (Mormon 8:31.)

### *The Joy of Repentance*

The Book of Mormon not only denounces sin and self-deception, but with equal force and feeling it teaches repentance—a repentance that is inspired of faith in God and a love for the Savior. For inspiration to overcome evil and sin does not derive from evil itself but from good.

Repentance is just the opposite of sin in many ways. Sin divides the self because in the process man acts against his true convictions. Repentance unifies the self because it is the process of squaring one's behavior with one's convictions. Sin brings with it confusion and weakness; repentance brings clarity and strength. Sin follows the neglect of God and truth and the "love" of self; repentance is made easy by self-forgetting love of God and truth. Sin brings sorrow; repentance brings joy.

Alma, the younger, knew from experience the sorrows of sin and the sweet fruits of repentance. In Alma, chapter 36, he reviews the whole gamut of his experiences to his son, Helaman. (The reader will enjoy this chapter.)

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## SUPERINTENDENTS

through every stage of education notwithstanding the changes in the comprehension and interests of individuals. Every teacher should remember that he is teaching persons and that subjects, important as they may be, are but means of helping individuals to develop into more serviceable, spiritually minded members of the community. The teacher must, therefore, do his best to understand the members of his class—their abilities, their experiences and their spiritual needs. This may require creation of new understandings and new interests. The subject under discussion should be made to

contribute toward this end. This can best be accomplished by class members' active participation in class discussions under leadership of the instructor. It requires more knowledge and teaching skill on his part than does preparation and delivery of a lecture.

What has this to do with the Junior Sunday School? If you have not read the articles on this subject in the *May Instructor*, including the one by Hazel W. Lewis in the Junior Sunday School department, do so before the July faculty meeting.

### SUPERINTENDENTS OF WARD AND BRANCH SUNDAY SCHOOLS—

—please confer immediately with the stake superintendent and mission supervisor in regard to a letter from the Sunday School general board to each of these officers asking for co-operation of all officers and teachers of Sunday Schools in the Church in carrying out plans recommended for observance of the 1949 centennial of the founding of Latter-day Saint Sunday Schools in Salt Lake City.

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### THE BOOK OF MORMON (Continued from page 277)

The Book of Mormon reveals the evils of a self-centered life. It portrays man's numerous sins which naturally follow such a view of life. It describes the principle of rationalization or self-deceit which is encouraged by preoccupation with self. It pleads with us and all men to remember the Creator and to walk in wisdom's path. And finally,

it inspires us to love God, the Father and His Son, for such a love brings repentance and saves us from evil.

*Selected Readings on Sin and Repentance:* II Nephi, chaps. 9 and 28; Jacob, chaps. 2 and 3; Mosiah, chap. 4; Alma, chaps. 5 and 36; Helaman, chap. 13; and Mormon, chap. 8.