



Type: Magazine Article

The Book of Mormon — A Guide to Religious Living: VIII. Justice and Mercy

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Source: *The Instructor*, Vol. 83, No. 8 (August 1948), pp. 357-359, 385

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The Book of Mormon — A Guide to Religious Living

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VIII. JUSTICE AND MERCY

IN Book of Mormon days, as in our time, there were always those who thought they could exempt themselves somehow from the workings of moral law. They did evil and expected to receive good in return. They sought happiness in wickedness—in violation of all the principles which make for happiness. Samuel the Lamanite declared the folly of their thinking when he said,

“. . . ye have sought all the days of your lives for that which ye could not obtain; and ye have sought for happiness in doing iniquity, which thing is contrary to the nature of that righteousness which is in our great and Eternal Head.” (Helaman 13:38.)

Alma, the younger, had a son named Corianton who failed to understand the reign of justice in the universe. In two most interesting chapters (41 and 42), Alma elucidates the principle for him. In chapter 41 he makes it plain that “the decrees of God are unalterable,” and that

“. . . it is requisite with the justice of God that men should be judged according to their works; and if their works were good in this

life, and the desires of their hearts were good, that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good. And if their works are evil they shall be restored unto them for evil. . . .”

(Vss. 3, 4.)

Evil for evil, good for good, justice for justice, mercy for mercy, happiness for righteousness—this is the inherent order of the universe, according to Alma. There is nothing arbitrary about the punishments of God. They follow naturally and surely from the violation of law. This is indicated in an earlier chapter, “Now I would that ye should see that they (the Amlicites) brought upon themselves the curse; and even so doth every man that is cursed bring upon himself his own condemnation.” (Alma 3:19.)

There are those who seem to think that the only punishment for violating moral principles is that invoked from without by Deity. Should they be without faith in God, they often assume there is no punishment for evil-doing. The Book of Mormon and the Bible reveal the shallowness of this view. Note the words of Jeremiah:

“Hear, O earth: behold, I will

bring evil upon this people, *even the fruit of their thoughts*, because they have not hearkened unto my words, nor to my law, but rejected it." (Jeremiah 6:19.)

"Do they (the wayward Israelites) provoke me to anger? saith the Lord: *do they not provoke themselves to the confusion of their own faces?*" (7:19.)

Mercy claimeth her own

If justice were the only law of God operative in the lives of men, man would be eternally burdened with the consequences of his wrongdoing. Very often we do things, the consequences of which in the lives of others are irreparable. The very character of some sins is such that it is beyond our power to pay the price for the wrongs we do. If a man should murder, how could he redeem the victim's life or make it right to the bereaved? Steal a man's coat and you can return it, but how can one return the loss of character, wholesome personality development and happy relationships? One can try and do much, but often restitution is beyond one's power. A debt is chalked up against one rather continuously in life.

The Apostle Paul was well aware of the "burden of the law." He knew how heavy the law of justice is to bear and how impossible it is for man to keep the full law. He found his release from the law, his salvation and freedom, through his faith in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Alma taught a similar point of

view which he develops in a most original way. The relationship of mercy and justice in the plan of salvation is developed most fully in Alma 42. It is interesting to see how Alma repeatedly safeguards the justice of God and yet with equal insistence also makes room for mercy.

"What," he said, "do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice? I say unto you, Nay; not one whit. If so God would cease to be God." (Vs. 25.)

"For behold, justice exerciseth all his demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is her own, . . ." (Vs. 24.)

Mercy, like justice, is also a law of God, a principle of life. She too must play her role. (In the last quoted verse justice is masculine, exercising *his* demands, and mercy, appropriately, is feminine, claiming all which is *her* own.) What is the role of mercy? Mercy cannot "destroy the work of justice." For the work of justice cannot be destroyed, or "God would cease to be God." (Vs. 13.)

Mercy, under certain conditions, to use Book of Mormon phrasing, "overpowereth justice," "appeases and satisfies the demands of justice."

"Mercy Claimeth the Penitent"

Mercy is able to satisfy the demands of justice because of two things: the atonement of Christ and the repentance of man. Without both of these factors operative, mercy would not be able to overpower justice according to Alma

and other authors of the Nephite record. In some way, not fully understood by man, Christ died to bring about the resurrection and also to suffer for the sins of men. His sacrificial love redeemed men from the debt of their sins and wrong-doings.

"And behold, this is the whole meaning of the law (of Moses), every whit pointing to that last and great sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal.

"And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, . . ." (Alma 34:14, 15.)

The truly unique Book of Mormon contribution to our understanding of the atonement of Christ is revealed in the next verse or two of this passage in Alma. Christ's atonement does not save men *in* their sins. Neither does it simply bring forgiveness once men have overcome sin. One great purpose of His sacrifice lay in that it ". . . bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance."

"And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore *only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption.*" (Alma 34:15, 16.)

Our understanding of the atonement of Christ leaves much to be desired. The Book of Mormon, however, throws considerable light on the subject. Consistent with its functional and dynamic theology, it teaches us our own part in the atonement, and this without robbing the Savior in the least of His boundless love and graciousness towards mankind.

The Book of Mormon teaches us that we live in a world of law and order. Among the laws are the great moral laws of God. Obedience to them brings happiness; disregard and disobedience bring unhappiness. Every law carries with it its punishment and reward. The Creator is just and impartial and will not set aside the principle of justice. Mercy is also a fundamental principle of life and also an attribute of God as surely as is justice. Mercy cannot rob justice, but through the sacrificial love of Christ she can overpower justice for all those who, through the Savior, find "faith unto repentance."

Repentance and mercy, two great principles of the gospel are brought into an intimate relationship by Alma. And Christ stands between them, as it were, inspiring repentance and promising mercy. One cannot be present without the other for repentance brings mercy and mercy presupposes repentance. The Book of Mormon accepting the hard reality of a world of law and order without question also makes room for the tender, loving, divine expression of forgiveness and mercy.

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other hand, if it is positive, there will be experiences to help forward the lesson—thoughts to stir thinking, questions to guide and stimulate, to draw forth experiences from the class. In other words, the teacher may well begin with a self-examination, with a gathering of materials that help to promote the central purpose of the lesson. Thus he or she is made a living part of what is to be taught. Thinking through a lesson means in essence, thinking one's self into it. (See *The Master's Art*, Chapter XIII.)

Teachers who really give themselves to the work keep growing. This means in effect to be a constant student, not alone of books but of life. As a practical suggestion, suppose the Word of Wisdom is to be impressed. Read the revelation, yes; but keep alert to living means of making it real in the living present. Watch the advertisements and see how they often unwittingly perhaps bring condemnation on the tobacco and liquor habits. Clip articles that illustrate the folly of smoking and drinking. All this will serve to bring the lesson into the living present.

Enrichment of life through ob-

servation, through well-selected reading, through purposeful conversation brings wealth to share. Gathering pictures of meaning and appeal gives choice materials. Adding choice sayings spoken and written by others expands and enriches one's life. All such preparation serves to help make lessons live because they bring an enriched, alert teacher to the work.

During this year, it is planned to keep close to the theme given at the outset of this brief article: *Lessons can be most successful only when the teacher really gives of himself or herself to the work.*

A rereading of the article under "Teacher Improvement" in the July issue of *The Instructor* will help here. It shows concretely through a demonstration lesson one way a teacher can give of himself or herself to the work. Other articles month by month will deal with various phases of the vital theme.

It is earnestly hoped that all our wards and stakes will study and act upon what is most vital in this series of challenging themes.

—Howard R. Driggs

THE BOOK OF MORMON—A GUIDE TO RELIGIOUS LIVING

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Reading the Book of Mormon will increase in one the desire to repent and also the assurance of forgiveness and mercy.

Readings: Mosiah 2:38, 39; 15 and 16, and Alma, Chapters 34, 41, and 42.