

The Book of Mormon — A Guide to Religious Living

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IX. MOTIVES IN RELIGIOUS LIVING

ALMA, the younger, during an extended missionary effort among the Nephites, met a people who were poor in heart. They had been brought to this state of mind because of their poverty. Their humility had been forced upon them by others who despised them because of the coarseness of their apparel.

Alma rejoiced to find a group of Nephites in a state of humility. It was an unusual experience and also an answer to his prayer. He uses the occasion to teach a simple but profound truth about humility—a truth which applies with equal force to every principle of religion.

Alma distinguishes between humility that is forced upon one from without—by external circumstances and the attitudes of others—and the humility that comes from within from a belief in and a love for the principle itself.

Humility Under Compulsion

In his sermon to the Nephites, Alma first discusses the merits of being “brought to a lowliness of heart.” He comes directly to his theme in a most interesting way.

“I say unto you, it is well that ye are cast out of your synagogues, that ye may be humble, and that ye may learn wisdom; for it is necessary that ye should learn wisdom; for it is because that ye are cast out, that ye are despised of your brethren because of your exceeding poverty, that ye are brought to a lowliness of heart; for ye are necessarily brought to be humble.”
(Alma 32:12.)

These particular Nephites could take no credit for the state of mind in which Alma found them. Their humility—even as the humility of many of us today—was like the position of mercury in a barometer, a matter of atmospheric pressure. The Nephite humility rose under pressure of poverty and the resulting social discrimination just as our own humility may increase in times of poverty, failure, illness, and declining strength.

Is there any virtue in being compelled to be humble? Alma has a good answer. There is little or no virtue in being brought low. The value lies in what may happen to us once we are humbled. In humbled circumstances, we may get a

new vision of things. We may find a better perspective, and come to a finer sense of values. Alma puts it this way:

"And now, because ye are compelled to be humble blessed are ye; for a man sometimes, if he is compelled to be humble, seeketh repentance; and now surely, whosoever repenteth shall find mercy; and he that findeth mercy and endureth to the end the same shall be saved." (Alma 32:13.)

The value in being forced into humility, as Alma clearly and wisely states, is that it sometimes inspires repentance. Often it does not, but only causes bitterness and hardness of heart. This is noted by Helaman, son of Alma, in a casual, true-to-life observation of the effect of extended hardship and suffering on his people.

"But behold, because of the exceeding great length of the war between the Nephites and the Lamanites many had become hardened, because of the exceeding great length of the war; and many were softened because of their afflictions, insomuch that they did humble themselves before God, even in the depth of humility." (Alma 62:41.)

Humility Without Compulsion

There is a type of humility which, according to Alma, is much more blessed than humility brought upon us by dint of circumstance. True humility is a state of mind in which we freely and naturally desire to learn the truth. We believe because we desire to believe. We are humble because we would not be otherwise. We are converted to the principle itself and delight in it. Note Alma's praise of true humility:

"And now, as I said unto you, that because ye were compelled to be humble ye were blessed, do ye not suppose that they are more blessed who truly humble themselves because of the word?

"Yea, he that truly humbleth himself, and repenteth of his sins, and endureth to the end, the same shall be blessed—yea, much more blessed than they who are compelled to be humble because of their exceeding poverty.

"Therefore, blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble; or rather, in other words, blessed is he that believeth in the word of God, and is baptized without stubbornness of heart, yea, without being brought

"Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly, then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God, and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven.

"The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy sceptre an unchanging sceptre of righteousness and truth, and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee for ever and ever." (Doc. and Cov. 121:45-46.)

to know the word, or even compelled to know, before they will believe." (Alma 32:14-16.)

Being humble under pressure has its limitations. It is often tinged with bitterness and resentment. When the pressure is removed, it too may vanish, leaving only scars. It may not be humility at all but something entirely different such as envy, hate, despair, confusion, failure, or distress.

Humility that is genuine and without compulsion is much more to be desired. It springs directly from the mind and heart. It is pure, unmarred by conflicting attitudes and emotions. It is enhanced by its sister virtues of tolerance, mercy and love. True humility endures because it is satisfying. It brings peace of mind.

True Religious Living

Alma's teaching about humility is in harmony with the Spirit of Jesus and many of the prophets who preceded and followed Him. Surely the Savior wanted us to live religion freely and with all our hearts—neither under compulsion nor for some ulterior motive foreign to the principles of religion to which we profess allegiance. This fact He made clear when He reaffirmed as the greatest of all commandments:

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."

Do we love God for what He is—a person of truth and righteousness, of justice and mercy—or do we "love" Him because of what we

want Him to do for us? Do we love Him or do we love the blessings which we seek at His hands?

Between friends, sweethearts, parent and child love is given freely without awareness of motive, without compulsion. This is one reason why love is so soul-satisfying through the ages among all peoples in these intimate relations. It is an expression of the whole man. Mind and heart are one, unified and made free by the object of their love.

Sometimes our love for God and especially our love for fellowmen lacks the spontaneity and genuineness of the love we feel for those near to us. It is marred by personal interests. It may not be love at all but only duty, the fulfilling of an obligation, the keeping of a commandment. It may even be self-love.

Let us consider an illustration or two indicating the difference between living religious principles under compulsion and believing in and loving principles for their own sake. A scoutmaster asked a small group of boys one evening,

"What would you do if you found \$1.00 too much in your pay envelope Saturday?"

One scout replied, "I'd keep it. I'm not paid enough anyway."

Another said, "I'd give it to the boss and maybe he would give me a raise because I'm honest."

A third concluded, "I'd give it back because he may have put it there to see if I were honest."

Actually, based on their replies, none of these boys really believed

in or knew the meaning of honesty. One wanted an extra dollar; another sought a reward; a third was afraid of being trapped. None knew the peace and strength of mind that comes from just being honest.

Who pays tithing in the fullest sense of the word? He who pays because he will be embarrassed if he doesn't; he who pays because he fears he will "burn as stubble" if he doesn't; he who believes it is his duty; he who thinks the Lord manages the safest investment company in the Universe or he who, out of a sense of gratitude to God and a love for the work of the Church, freely and gladly gives to a good cause?

An Avenue to Freedom

Man for all his conveniences and power of communication, is hedged in on every side. Usually he works for someone else. He conforms his life to his job. He is under pressure to keep up with the Joneses. His social obligations are frequently many and burdensome. He is obsessed with fears, desires, hopes, and needs. His life lacks a sense of oneness, wholeness, and creativeness. It seems sometimes to resemble a

quilt of patch-work without design or meaning.

It is only in the realm of the spirit—in the thoughts we think, the things we love, and the things we believe—that we can feel ourselves to be truly free. Jesus must have known this when He said, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

He taught us the truth that will make us free. It will not make us free, however, if religious living is burdensome to us because it is motivated by some form of external compulsion — fear of punishment, desire for personal gain, or even out of a sense of duty. His religion will make us free only if, as Alma taught, we learn to be true believers, true converts to the Gospel of Christ, only if the religious life is born of love.

Confucius, the sage of China, put it this way. "He who loves the truth is greater than he who knows it, and he who delights in the truth is greater than he who loves it."

To quote Alma again, "Blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble."

Readings: Alma 32; Matt. 6; Doc. and Cov. 121:41-46.

"And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.

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"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." (I John 4:16, 18.)